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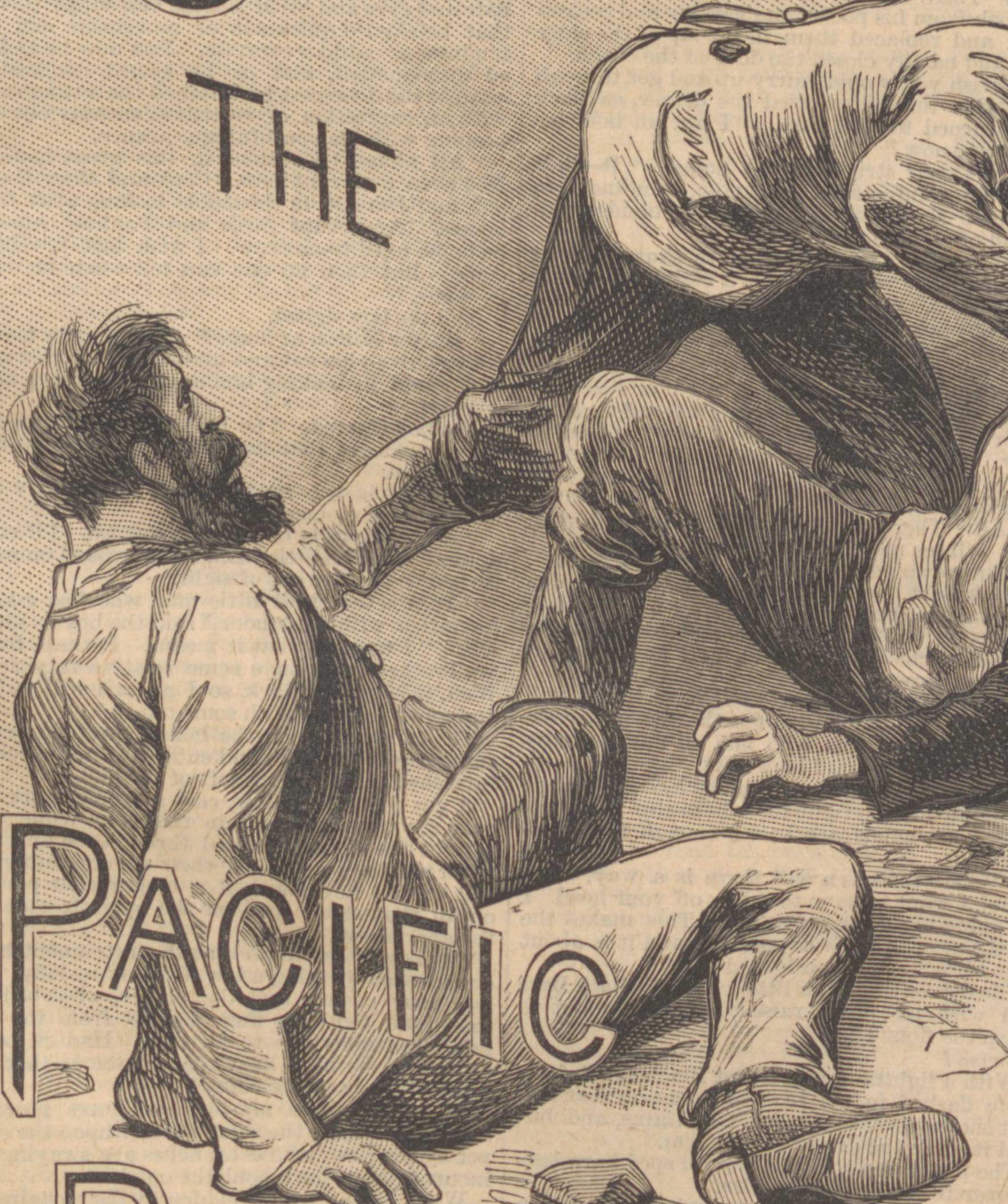
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No. 398

SLEEPLESS EYE

THE

PACIFIC DETECTIVE



"SOME PEOPLE SAY I'M—I'M A DUDE, YOU KNOW, BUT THERE ARE OTHERS WHO
KNOW ME AS—" HERE HE BENT DOWN AND HISSED THROUGH HIS SET
TEETH, "SLEEPLESS EYE, THE PACIFIC DETECTIVE."

OR,
Running Down a Double.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.

CHAPTER I.
"HANDS UP."

A MOUNTAIN gorge in California. On each side, springing upward two thousand feet to kiss the blue sky that overhangs the Golden Slope, rocks—dark, grim, pitiless. Here and there, peeping from fissures in the great bare walls, stunted shrubbery, while ever and anon a distant rumbling told that some huge boulder had become displaced by the action of wind or water, to be hurled headlong to the valley below. In the west the autumnal sun was sinking in a blaze of glory, tinging with blood-red the summits of the distant mountains from whence could almost be seen the mighty Pacific Ocean, sleeping peacefully like a weary giant. Looking down the ravine to the east, the scene changed. As far as the eye could reach, the narrow passage between the frowning cliffs extended, until it seemed to melt into the shadows of a sky from which the god of day had already begun to turn in anger.

Seated on a loose rock that lay half across the roadway was a man. Tall, well-proportioned, and with a heavy beard covering the lower part of his face, he looked the typical Californian. His dress was a rough, blue-flannel shirt, an old sack-coat with large pockets, and buckskin overalls tucked inside cowhide boots. Around his waist was a leather belt, in which were a revolver and a long knife, partly concealed by the coat. In the hollow of his left arm, with the butt on the ground, rested a Winchester repeating rifle.

Looking up at the sun, the man muttered to himself:

"Just about six o'clock. The Santora stage must be along pretty soon. Hist! What's that?"

Throwing himself upon his face, he listened intently. Then he arose slowly, and said:

"Wheels and hoofs, sure enough! Now for business. Get through this evening's work all right, and Black Bart goes off the road forever!"

Black Bart, as he had called himself, took his revolver from his belt, carefully inspected its six chambers, made sure that his knife slipped easily in its sheath, and tried the lock of his repeating-rifle.

"Everything right up to the handle. Now for my night-cap."

He picked up an old flour-bag lying at his side and put it on over his head. Then he thrust his arms through holes made for them, and tied the bag around his waist. He was thus completely disguised, though his glittering black eyes could be seen flashing through a pair of eye-holes with a deadly purpose that meant mischief to any one crossing the owner.

Scarcely were his preparations complete when the faint noise of the approaching stage-coach increased to a well-defined beating of horses' feet on the hard, uneven road and the crunching of wheels as they rattled over the loose stones.

Black Bart jumped behind a rock and crouched down.

Not a moment too soon! Swinging into sight as suddenly as if it had sprung out of the ground, the coach was within a few hundred yards of the spot where robbery and perhaps death awaited its inmates.

The driver had his horses well in hand as they reached the top of an incline up which they had been toiling, and which had prevented their being seen before. He was looking straight ahead and was hardly listening to the chatter of the dude who sat beside him.

"G'lang!" he yelled, as he touched the flanks of the leaders with his whip. "We want to get to Santora some time to-night."

"Now, my good man," said his companion, "take things easy. That's what we always do in the East. I should never have got through college if I hadn't always been cool and collected."

"Not easily scared, I suppose," said the driver, dryly.

"Scared!" echoed the dude, as he pulled out a little seven-shooter. "I'd like to see anything scare me."

"Hands up!" was the sudden yell that made the dude drop his pistol in the road, as Black Bart jumped into the middle of the trail and covered the driver with his rifle.

The driver had met road-agents before, so he just dropped the lines and held up his hands as if it were a regular thing.

"Throw your hands up I tell you!" cried Black Bart, his voice sounding strangely muffled underneath the flour-bag, as he held the bridle of the near leader with his left hand, and pointed his rifle at the dude with his right.

"Who—who—who do you mean?" stammered the dude.

"You!" returned Black Bart, sternly. "And be quick unless you want to chew a bullet. I can't hold back this hammer much longer."

"Well, don't—don't shoot. I—I—I didn't know exactly wha—what—"

The trembling traveler managed to lift his hands and Black Bart stepped toward the coach door.

"Get down from there," he ordered. "One at a time!"

The dude crawled down from his perch, and, in obedience to Black Bart's command, stood with his hands up and with his back to the horses. Then the driver followed and ranged himself alongside of the dude.

"I guess I'll slip the bracelets on you, Joe," said Black Bart to the driver. "You have a little too much muscle to be allowed around loose."

With a dextrous movement Black Bart drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and secured the driver's hands behind him, never taking his watchful eyes off the coach, and keeping his finger on the trigger of his Winchester, ready to put a bullet into the first one who showed signs of resistance.

By this time the sun had sunk until the shadow of the mountains threw a gloom over the ravine, and Black Bart was anxious to get through with his work. He climbed quickly to the roof of the coach, threw down the heavy box containing the treasure of the Express

Company, and then, with his knife, ripped open the mail bag from which he took a bundle of letters and slipped them into his coat pocket.

"I don't suppose they will be much use to me," he muttered, "but I may as well have them. Now for the inside of the coach! They are very quiet in there. Women, I suppose."

He leaped down, giving the dude a slight kick as he did so, and opened the coach door. There were two ladies, both in a dead faint. One, who lay back in the seat with her face away from him, was apparently about fifty years of age. In her lap were a bulky pocket-book, a gold watch and chain, a pair of diamond ear-rings and two diamond finger-rings. She had evidently taken them off at the first alarm and then fainted away before she had time to hide them.

"Very thoughtful, I am sure," said Black Bart, sarcastically. "Saves me the trouble of hunting for them."

He quickly transferred the property to one of his capacious pockets and then turned his attention to the other lady. She, like her companion was richly dressed, but over her face was a thick green veil. From under her neat little traveling hat escaped tresses of fine hair the color of spun gold, while her dainty little white hand and neat girlish figure told the observer that she was young and probably beautiful.

"Seems a shame to take anything from such a poor little thing," muttered Black Bart. "But necessity knows no law, so here goes."

He raised one of the girl's hands and was about to pull off a ring that encircled her forefinger when he started back as if stung by a scorpion.

"Great heavens! What's that? That ring! Surely there cannot be two of the same pattern in the country? Cannot be possible that I must see her face."

He lifted the corner of her veil carefully, but ere he could see the face of the girl she partially revived and murmured: "Father, save me!"

Black Bart staggered back like a drunken man. Then he did a rather peculiar thing. He took from his pocket the jewelry and pocket-book and replaced them in the lap of the elder lady and hastily closed the door of the coach.

"I wish you would hurry up and get through with this thing," growled the driver, as Black Bart turned toward him. "I am an hour behind time now."

"Ye—yes!" struck in the dude. "It—it is deuced uncomfortable, you know, standing here on these sharp stones, and—and—besides, I'm afraid of catching cold."

"If you don't keep your mouth shut I'll send you to a place where there is a big fire burning all the time," retorted Black Bart. "Now, I'll open this box and then bid you good-night."

He slipped his hand into a crevice in the rocks and drew forth a pick and an ax. A few well-directed blows on the lid of the box forced it open, and Black Bart's eyes glistened through his eye-holes as a heap of gold was exposed to view. Drawing a deep sack from his pocket, where it had lain neatly folded, he filled it with the glittering coins.

"Ah! There must be \$10,000 in that pile! That will see me through, I guess, and now—"

"Throw up your hands!" thundered a voice.

Black Bart made a movement to get his rifle into position, but the muzzle of an ugly-looking six-shooter within a few inches of his eye-holes made him change his mind, and he raised his hands as directed.

"You can't most always tell how things will come out, can you?" inquired the driver, sarcastically, for he it was who had so unexpectedly turned the tables on Black Bart.

"How did you get your hands loose? I made the handcuffs too tight for you to slip them, besides, your hands are broad enough for snow-shoes."

"Where there is a will there is a way. But come! I want to have that bag off your head. I am going to see who you are. This makes the third time you have stopped me, and it is about time I knew what you looked like."

The driver stepped a little closer to Black Bart still with his pistol raised, and was about to grasp the flour-bag.

"Swish!" With a lightning movement Black Bart's long knife flashed in the rays of the moon that had just shown itself above the mountains, and buried itself in the driver's right arm.

The pistol went off, but the ball sped harmlessly over Black Bart's shoulder.

Then the driver drew a bowie-knife, and a hand-to-hand encounter of terrible earnestness commenced. Back and forth, from side to side surged the two men. About equal in size and strength, it was evident from the first that victory hung altogether upon chance.

But, where was the dude all this time? He had disappeared before the fight commenced, and though there was no apparent hiding-place in the vicinity, not a sign of him was to be seen!

The two combatants had each grasped the other by the right wrist and each strove to force his foe back. Both stood like a rock.

Then Black Bart slowly twisted his knife in his hand and tried to get the point of it into the arm of the driver, hoping to cut the tendons and thereby disable it. Then it would be easy to overcome him.

Gradually the knife turned, and the other, although he saw the maneuver, was powerless to prevent it.

Another inch and the keen blade would sink into the quivering flesh. With a superhuman effort the driver drew his arm a little away from the blade, and at the same instant Black Bart tried to reach it! Ah! The already weakened right arm of the driver gives way a little and Black Bart redoubles his efforts.

Slowly he pushes the other away as he strives to get his knife-hand free. One more tug and down they go, with Black Bart on top. He tears his hand loose from the other's grasp and raises his knife high in the air.

With all his force he plunges it at the throat of the prostrate driver, when—

A powerful pair of hands grasp the head of Black Bart behind and he is pulled off before he can execute his purpose. He is laid on his back, with a man's knee on his chest and a pair of wild blue eyes glancing carelessly down at the flour-bag that covers the head of the robber.

The knee and the blue eyes were those of the dude!

"Who the de'il are you?" panted Black Bart, as he felt the other's iron clutch on his throat, and realized that the effeminate looking young man was possessed of lion-like strength.

"Well, you—you know, some people say I'm—I'm a dude, you know, but there are others who know me as—" Here he bent down and hissed through his set teeth "SLEEPLESS EYE, THE PACIFIC DETECTIVE."

CHAPTER II.

A SHADY WARNING.

At the time the events narrated in the last chapter were transpiring, a lad of about eighteen years of age stood at the front door of a large private residence in San Francisco.

A bright, handsome boy was he, with dark hair and eyes and with a lithe and supple form that betokened quickness of movement and a fondness of outdoor exercise. Just now he looked discontented, and as he leaned carelessly against the door-post he watched the setting sun with an expression of weariness entirely out of keeping with his youthful appearance.

"All alone! All alone in this great house! Not even a servant here. Cook and Mary both out, and Jim out in the stable looking after the horses. And Aunt Susie and Pauline cannot be home until to-morrow. I wish father would come. But then no one can tell when he will be home."

And the boy sighed.

"Doctor Milton at home?" asked a little man, whose stove-pipe hat and high-heeled shoes were ineffectual in making him appear anything but a dwarf.

The boy started. The little man had appeared so suddenly that he seemed almost like an apparition.

"No, he is not in just now, but he may be home at any moment."

"Ah, well, it is of no consequence. I'll call again," said the little man, as he walked on and turned the corner out of sight.

"That is the third little man who has asked for father within an hour," said the boy to himself. "I wonder what it means. Perhaps they are brothers, and have some relative very sick. Well, it is getting dark, so I guess I will go in and amuse myself with some music."

The lad went inside the house, carefully fastening the front door, and entered a luxuriously furnished parlor on the left of the hall.

A gas jet, turned low, cast a feeble glimmer over the various objects in the room, while the rays of the moon streamed through the unshuttered windows and shed their silvery radiance full on the key-board of a magnificent parlor organ that stood open on the opposite side of the apartment.

The boy seated himself at the instrument and commenced playing a low, dreamy melody. A half-hour passed, and the player, absorbed in the grand tones his fingers drew from the organ, was oblivious to all else. Had it been otherwise, he must have been conscious that he was not alone in the room!

What are those mysterious figures moving stealthily among the shadows cast upon the carpet by the trees whose branches are swaying so mournfully in the moonlight outside?

What is that, partly hidden by the curtains at the side of the window?

Why does that ghost-like presence near the door point with bony finger at the boy and then beckon to its companions as if warning them to move quietly toward him?

The organ breaks out into a mighty wave of harmony, that surges and swells and seems to endow with life all the inanimate objects in the darkened room.

The three figures glide swiftly in the direction of the instrument, and as they surround the boy—one on each side and one behind—he turns quickly and sees that they are the three dwarfs

who asked for his father when he stood at the front door.

"Make not a sound," warned the dwarf, at his right hand, "if you value your life."

The boy's face flushed and he half-arose from his seat. Three pairs of hands seized him by the shoulders and forced him down again.

"Who are you? What do you want?" demanded the boy, in a low voice. "If you want to rob the house it will hardly pay you. There is not an ounce of silver plate or a dollar's worth of jewelry in the place."

"You are mistaken. We are not thieves," was the reply. "But you must come with us. We have use for you."

"I will not. Who are you that I should do your bidding? I believe you are only common sneak thieves, who have crawled into the house because you think I am alone. I'll soon show you that you have made a bad mistake."

The boy had tried to speak in a loud voice, but some mysterious power controlled his tongue and his utterance was scarcely more than a whisper.

"You say you won't come, eh? We will see," returned the dwarf.

He made a few passes with his hands in front of the boy's eyes and slowly backed away from him toward the door. The starting eyeballs of the latter as he arose from his seat and followed showed that the mesmeric influence was complete. The other two followed the boy and his conductor.

Up the wide staircase they went in single file, the boy never moving his eyes from those of the mysterious being who had him in his thrall.

All three of the dwarfs were bare-headed, and by the light of a hall lamp that swung from the ceiling in the second story it could be seen that their hair was of a silvery white.

And yet they were not old. They looked rather as if they had lived a hard life and had acquired the honorable signs of age without its experiences.

At length they reached the highest floor of the house and paused under a trap that led to the roof, and to which a ladder was placed.

Here the leader removed his eyes from those of the boy for a moment and the spell was broken.

With a bound the boy reached the door of a room on the left and disappeared. The three brothers, for such the dwarfs were, sprung after him.

The room was in pitch darkness, but one of the dwarfs produced a small bull's-eye lantern and flashed the light over to a corner of the room. There was the boy hastily secreting a small ebony box that he had taken from an old-fashioned escritoire. It was about six inches square and two deep, and the boy slipped it easily into an inside pocket.

"Ralph Milton, don't be a fool," cried the dwarf who had been the spokesman all along. "You will persist in thinking we are robbers."

"How can I think otherwise? Your actions are anything but those of honest men. What right have you in this house at all?"

"One that you little respect," returned the dwarf, in a deep voice, "but a good one, nevertheless."

"Were it not for raising a disturbance I would make you prove it in the presence of a policeman. As it is, I will give you just five minutes to get out of the house," retorted the boy, with a threatening shake of the head.

"Listen!" said the dwarf. He stepped up to the boy and whispered in his ear.

The boy's face flushed in the light of the lantern.

"It is a lie!" he shrieked.

"It is the truth!" responded the three dwarfs together.

"Prove it!"

"We will. Follow us!"

There was no hesitation on the part of Ralph Milton now. He followed his three strange companions up the ladder, onto the flat roof of the house, and along the inside of the parapet until a stream of light from a similar opening to that up which they had come attracted his attention.

"This is the place," announced the dwarf. "Come!"

Down the ladder and into a poorly furnished room, but brilliantly lighted by four lamps hung in front of reflectors against the walls.

An old woman with white hair, and bearing a fantastic resemblance to the three dwarfs, hung over a small fire burning in the grate, while at her elbow was a table on which were the remains of a meal—dirty plates, cups and saucers, part of a loaf of bread, etc.

But that which caught Ralph's eye immediately was a much more pleasing object than the old woman. Lying on a bed at the end of the room furthest removed from the fire, and fast asleep, was a beautiful young girl, apparently about sixteen years of age. She was dressed in a neat costume of some dark material, and her daintily trimmed straw hat had apparently fallen from her head when she had lain down, as if she had been too tired to remove it first. Her dark hair, escaped from its fastenings, fell around her in a soft mantle and framed in the aristocratic features of the sleeper like a picture by Rembrandt.

From the slightly parted red lips the breath of

innocence escaped peacefully and seemed to whisper fairy tales from dreamland. It was a sight strangely out of keeping with the surroundings.

"Well, mother, we have returned," said the dwarf, "and here is Ralph Milton."

"Ay, ay!" said the old woman, rising from her chair and hobbling toward Ralph, "he is like his father—like his father. I am eighty-one years old to-day, boy—eighty-one years old. Those are my three sons. Fine fellows—eh? Not very tall, but good boys—good boys. Victor!"

"Yes, mother," said the dwarf, who had been the conductor of Ralph, and seemed to be the recognized head of the family.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yes, but he will not believe it!"

"Of course—of course. Well, get to business."

The old woman went over to the sleeping girl and shook her roughly by the shoulder. The sleeper sighed heavily, but did not move.

"Ugh! The obstinate fool! I can't wake her. Come here, Victor; you will have to manage her."

The dwarf she called Victor smiled in a way that made Ralph feel as if he could have throttled him, and placing his two hands on the cheeks of the girl, said sharply and distinctly: "Garnett!"

In an instant she was sitting up on the bed and looking at Victor, as if asking his will. He pointed to a chair near the fire, and she immediately arose and took her seat there.

"Now, Ralph, we are in a certain business here, and we require your help. You must give it, and you must keep it a secret. We have means to make you obey us, and we shall not scruple to use them," announced Victor. "We could have brought you into it before if we had wished, but the time was not ripe."

"You must think I am a fool," returned Ralph, disdainfully. "We are in San Francisco, a city that has a good police force, law courts and a strong government. You can't make me do anything against my will. Such things are impossible now, in the year 1880, whatever they may have been thirty years ago."

"We shall see," was the ominous response. "I told you your father was in danger. Now you shall know what that danger is. Mother, turn the lamps down."

The old woman went to each of the four lamps in turn, and reduced the flame to a mere speck. Victor then, with a match, lighted some chemical fluid in a shallow iron dish, which cast a bluish glare over the faces of those in the room, and gave to the three white-headed dwarfs, and their old hag of a mother a ghastly appearance that was almost devilish. The young girl sat still in her chair as if spell-bound, while Ralph looked on with an awe that he could not repress.

"Garnett," said Victor, "you will tell this young man that to you has been given the power of tearing away the misty veil that hides the unknowable from ordinary beings, and that you can reveal the doings of those who are separated from us by many miles of space, by mountains, valleys, rivers and seas, and even by the diameter of the earth itself!"

"Yes, yes, oh, yes!" moaned the girl, in agonized tones, as she put up her hands, as if to ward off threatened danger. "But, spare me! Do not force me into that state that seems to chill my very marrow with the clammy touch of a living death!"

"Nonsense, Garnett. It does you no harm, and it is a very useful thing to your friends," protested Victor.

The blue light increased in intensity and shed its baleful reflection full in the face of the girl as Victor extended his bony fingers and waved them before her eyes. Gradually the eyelids drooped, the head fell back and the form grew rigid, as with a deep sigh she apparently lost consciousness.

Ralph made a start forward, exclaiming:

"What fiendish work is this? Why—"

"Hush!" warned Victor. "I will show you your father's peril. Garnett, what do you see?"

He passed his hand three times over the girl's face and at the third pass she opened her lips, and in a low voice, said, slowly and distinctly:

"I see a man, with a heavy black beard and dark eyes, in a fierce struggle with another whose face is hidden from my sight. Both have knives and he of the black beard is about to plunge his blade into the throat of his foe. He whirls his arm aloft, the knife descends, and—it is turned aside by that of the other. They clash again and again. The black-bearded man is down. The other has him at his mercy, and—Oh! spare him! Spare him! Spare me! I cannot—bear—to—"

With a shriek the girl started up and shuddered as if an icy blast had struck her slender frame.

"Ah! she recovered from the influence too soon!" remarked Victor, coolly, as he pushed her back into her seat. "It was my own fault for not watching her closer."

A few more passes and Garnett was again helpless.

"Who is the black-bearded man?" asked

Victor, bending over until his face almost touched that of the clairvoyant.

"Listen! He speaks!" she murmured. "He calls upon Ralph to save him."

"How?" interrupted Ralph, eagerly.

"If my boy Ralph will take the small ebony box from the escritoire and show what it contains to Victor Kenaire, in the presence of his mother and two brothers, my life will be spared. Victor will tell my boy what to do afterward. If Ralph refuses to do this then I must receive the dagger blow."

"What will you do?" asked Victor, in a deep voice.

"What can I say? My father left that box in my hands as a sacred trust. How do I know that this is not all a trick to make me prove a traitor to him?"

"The blow is about to fall. The knife is within an inch of his breast," said the clairvoyant in the same measured tones she had hitherto used. "One second and it will be too—"

"Hold!" cried Ralph. "I will save him!"

CHAPTER III.

ON THE ROAD TO ANGEL CAMP.

WHEN Black Bart found himself so thoroughly in the power of the extraordinary being whose significant *sobrquet* of Sleepless Eye had been given him by the wild and lawless spirits of the West, because of his wonderful powers as a detective, he felt that the game was up.

"What do you intend to do now?" he asked. "Cut my throat?"

"Well, no," replied Sleepless Eye, still speaking with the affected accent of a dud. "I have been chasing you too long, Black Bart, to kill you. I am just going to take you back in the mountains and make you give me a little information I need about certain matters, and it all depends upon yourself what kind of a character I give you to the authorities when I deliver you up to them."

"You mean, I'm to turn State's evidence and help you to put a rope around the necks of men as good as you are, or ever will be. Isn't that it?" asked Black Bart, with a sneer.

"Put it that way if you please. Anyhow, you will have to go with me now. Joe, you had better take that box and other things from him, and then get along to Santora."

There was nothing of the dud about the detective now, and one could hardly believe that this determined looking man was one and the same with the effeminate youth who had appeared so frightened of Black Bart twenty minutes ago.

"All right," returned Joe. "You just mind he don't kick while I go through him."

"I don't think the gentleman will cause you any trouble," returned the Pacific Sleuth, with a significant glance at his prostrate captive. "Take away his gun and knife and put them out of his reach, with his Winchester. Then take the letters, fix up your mail-bag as well as you can and get along."

"Ain't you going to let me say a word to that young lady in the coach?" asked Black Bart, from beneath his flour-bag mask.

"Say a word to the young lady? You're getting to be a masher, eh? I guess not, Black Bart. The young lady is in a faint, for one thing, and even if she were not I don't think she would care about having a conversation with you. No, I am afraid you will have to wait for some future time for an interview. Hurry up, Joe!"

Joe did as he was directed. He took the weapons and letters from the now helpless robber, putting the first on the ground and the last on the coach. Then he restored the box to its position after emptying from Black Bart's bag the coins he had lately placed there. Then he glanced inside the coach, saw that the elderly lady had recovered consciousness and was employed in reviving the young one, jumped to his perch, cracked his long whip and rattled away with a "Good-night" to Sleepless Eye and a triumphant chuckle over Black Bart's discomfiture.

Sleepless Eye and Black Bart remained in the same positions until the last echo of the hoof-beats and wheels had mingled with the hum that is always in the air on an autumn night in California. Then the detective loosened his grasp, and rising to his feet, kept his derringer pointed at Black Bart's head and told him to get up.

The road-agent did so.

"Now take off your mask."

"I will not."

"Take it off, I tell you."

There was a peculiar ring in the voice of the detective that generally indicates an explosion of gunpowder soon to follow.

Black Bart recognized it and sulkily replied:

"Well, you have me foul and I must do as you say. But you will be the first man who has ever seen my face against my will."

He slowly unfastened the string that held the flour-bag around his waist, and pulled the covering from his head. His face was white with passion and there was an ominous working of the compressed lips under the black mustache that told of fierce purpose held in difficult restraint.

"Now that you see me," he said, "you see a

man who does not easily forget a favor or an insult."

"Insult, eh? That's good! I'm thinking you will be more insulted than you have been before I get through with you. I just wanted to show you who was boss, and I think I have succeeded."

Black Bart made a movement as if he would fly at the other's throat.

"Don't do that!" warned the Pacific Detective, with a smile. "It won't pay you."

"I know it; curse you!" returned Black Bart. "But I'll get even some time."

"In the mean time we may as well meander," said Sleepless Eye, with a smile.

He gathered up Black Bart's weapons, put the knife and pistol in his belt and held the Winchester with its muzzle pointing at the robber's head.

"Now, Bart," he said. "You know the way. I want you to lead me to Angel Camp, and do it without letting the boys know I am with you, or—"

He touched the lock of the Winchester significantly.

"Never," said Black Bart, hotly.

"Oh, yes, you will," returned Sleepless Eye, quietly. "Lead on. The moon is clear and we can easily see to walk along."

For a moment the two men gazed at each other. The one with a hunted expression like that of a wounded tiger at bay. The other with the confident smile of conscious power, seeming rather to enjoy the impotent efforts of the trapped robber to break the bonds that held him.

"I am waiting for you to start," remarked the Pacific Sleuth, at length.

Without another word, Black Bart turned around and walked toward a rift in the rock that would otherwise have escaped the detective's notice. Close inspection showed a narrow path, not more than three feet wide, which wound up the face of the cliff to its very summit.

"This is the way," he said, shortly.

"Well, lead on."

"Wait a minute. I want to leave a verse here as usual, even if I did miss my game."

Black Bart tore a leaf from a small note-book and scrawled on it, hastily:

"On this spot, ere a year rolls round,
Black Bart will once again be found.

"SEPTEMBER—, 1880. BLACK BART, Po 8."

He placed the scrap of paper by the side of the road and put a small stone on it to prevent it blowing away.

"What's that?" asked the detective, picking up the paper and glancing at the words written. "'Um, you take a hopeful view of things, don't you? Well, let it stay there; it won't do any harm, I guess," he added, as he replaced the paper and secured it as before.

Once more Black Bart resumed his journey up the narrow footpath, the detective following closely and holding the Winchester ready for instant use.

Black Bart showed no further signs of disappointment or dismay, but silently plodded along, his eyes bent on the ground and his arms hanging listlessly by his side.

The moon gradually sunk behind the clouds in the distance and the gloom that overspread the lonely path grew deeper. Hour after hour they walked, the detective never relaxing his vigilance for an instant, but seeming to see better as it became darker. At last he spoke:

"Bart, we must be near the place now, from the information I have received."

"Well, I know it. But you don't suppose the boys are all out on top of this mountain, with a big fire burning, where they could be admired by the first engineer who came along with his train below there? The Union Pacific Railroad runs along at the foot of these hills. See! There's a train now."

The detectives followed the direction of Black Bart's finger and saw something that looked like a black snake, with head and eyes of flame, twining through the valley two thousand feet below. It was the Express, bound for San Francisco.

In the clear atmosphere the puffing of the locomotive sounded as plainly as if it were within a hundred yards of where they stood. The hoarse toot for "down brakes!" as it struck a steep grade smote the ear sharply with its discordant note, and the scraping of the locked wheels on the rails as the order was obeyed sounded like the groans of agonized multitudes.

Now could the flickering lights from the many windows be distinguished as the cars swept around a bend, and then with a final wail from the locomotive the train plunged into the shadow of the mountains and was gone.

"She must be on that train," murmured Black Bart to himself. A softer light stole into the black eyes of the robber as he continued: "Little does she think who is within a mile or two of her on this mountain, and who has made an outcast of himself for her sake!"

"What's that?" demanded Sleepless Eye.

"Nothing. I was only trying to put together a little poem on the beauty of the night," returned Black Bart, with a forced laugh.

"Ah! If you had confined yourself to poetry

you would have saved yourself a good deal of trouble, I guess."

"Yes. I suppose I would. Poets have a very fine life, as a rule, and make lots of money, don't they?"

But the Pacific Sleuth was carefully examining the ground and did not make any reply to Black Bart's question, though he kept the Winchester carefully directed toward the head of the robber and was evidently prepared for any attempted surprise on his part.

"Where is the camp, Bart?"

"Where is it?"

"Yes. Come, now, don't try any monkey work. I know it is somewhere hereabout, so just lead to the place without any more idle talk."

"You seem to take it for granted that I will give the thing away. I don't think I ever told you that I would do so."

"You dare not refuse me!" and Sleepless Eye's mien was at once menacing and fierce.

"You don't know what a desperate man dares when he is cornered," returned Black Bart. "Suppose I were to take you to Angel Camp, do you think you would ever leave it alive?"

"I certainly do."

"Perhaps you might be fooled."

"No, I should not, and I'll tell you why. You have one object in life for which you would give up every hope you have, both in this world and the next. What that object is I know, and so do others. Were I to meet the fate you hint at that object could never be accomplished, and the persons you love better than everything else besides would be dragged to a doom worse than you can conceive."

"No, no, no!" cried Black Bart, shudderingly. "Anything but that!"

"So, you see, I knew perfectly well what I was about when I came up here with you, instead of taking you to jail in Calaveras county as I could very easily have done."

"Yes, so you could. But how could you have interfered with my plans for the length of—"

"I will tell you. In the course of my business, I came into the possession of a good many family secrets. Among others I know yours. I know that you have not always been what you are now. I know that some ten years ago you were teaching school in the northern part of this State. I know that while there you managed to infatuate a certain widow. I know that the widow mysteriously disappeared—supposed to have run away with a fellow from Chicago."

While saying this in earnest tones the detective had been gradually moving nearer to the edge of the precipice that overhung the abyss now buried in the shadows of an impenetrable darkness.

Black Bart watched him closely and a dark thought surged through his brain. If he would only make a misstep!

But the Sleepless Eye was not prepared to make any mistake. He evidently did not intend to go too far, as he continued: "The widow had a daughter—a pretty little thing of eight years, and that girl, now a beautiful young woman, is—"

Beware, Sleepless Eye!

Too late! An unseen hand suddenly seized the Winchester and wrenched it from his grasp, while a force that seemed to him almost superhuman bore him to the extreme verge of the precipice. For one second he beat the air wildly as he swayed over the awful abyss; then his feet left the ground and he plunged headlong into space!

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEAD FACE AT THE WINDOW.

WHEN Ralph Milton said he would save his father by revealing the contents of the ebony box to Victor Renaire, he meant it. Though only partly believing in the power of a man to make the agents of a supernatural state subservient to his will, the solemn influences brought to bear upon him, in conjunction with the apparently truthful utterances of the beautiful Garnett, completely bewildered him, and he was fain to accept her words as a command from his absent father.

Therefore it came to pass that, Garnett having been sent to bed in an adjoining room, and the lamps on the walls turned up again Ralph drew the ebony box from his inside pocket and prepared to show its contents to Victor Renaire his brothers and his mother.

"Mother, take a light and look outside the door," said Victor. "We don't want any eavesdroppers."

"Ay, ay!" grumbled the crone. "Eighty-one years old and have to act as servant for my own son. That's the way of the world—the way of the world!"

She went to the door with a lamp, notwithstanding, and after looking carefully around the landing and down the stairs, came hobbling back with the assertion that the coast was quite clear.

"Open the box, Ralph," said Victor, "or let me do so."

"No," returned Ralph, hastily snatching the little ebony box from the table. "I am the only person to touch it."

"As you will."

Ralph drew from its hiding-place underneath his clothes a small gold key. It was suspended around his neck by a hair guard. He fitted the key to the lock of the box and turned it.

The lid flew open and showed—another box the counterpart of the outer one, save in the matter of size. Stay! There was another difference. The inner receptacle had no key-hole and though on taking it out there was no apparent means of fastening it, it was shut tightly and resisted all Ralph's efforts to raise the lid.

"I cannot open it. My father never gave me the secret to it," he said.

"Break it open," said one of the dwarfs who had not previously spoken.

"No, Marcus; that will not do," interrupted Victor. "There must be some means of getting it open without resorting to extremities."

Ralph was turning the box over and over, looking at it from all sides, but his examination only served to involve him deeper in the puzzle.

"I think a hatchet would be the best thing to use," insisted Marcus, an ugly smile crawling over his monkey-like face and losing itself in the roots of his white hair.

"Shall I get one?" suggested the third dwarf, moving toward the door.

"No, Jacques, no!" came from Victor, in impatient tones. "We shall find a method to get it open in a minute or two."

"I believe I have it!" exclaimed Ralph, suddenly. "I see a faint line in the dead black of the wood around one end, and if I can only—"

The box flew open in obedience to an inadvertent touch of Ralph's finger upon a secret spring.

All pressed forward to see what was inside. Ralph carefully lifted out some flat article that filled the box and that was neatly wrapped in several thicknesses of tissue paper.

What could it be?

The paper wrappings were removed one by one, and then—a plain piece of highly polished steel was seen. That was all!

Not so fast! Look closer at the polished surface of the steel plate, and some delicate tracery will be discernible. Figures and letters are there, with ornamental flourishes and borders, while large and distinct the figures "1,000" stand out boldly from the rest.

It was a plate for printing counterfeit thousand-dollar bills!

Victor and his two brothers examined the plate critically.

"Fine work—very fine work," they said, in chorus.

"Ay, ay! More trouble—more trouble!" broke in the old woman. "There'll be an end to this thing some day, and then my boys will bring up in the penitentiary."

"Shut your mouth!" snapped Victor, angrily.

Then he went on, addressing Ralph:

"I suppose you knew before that your father was in the counterfeiting line. But if you didn't, why, of course, this proves it."

"It doesn't prove anything of the kind!" shouted Ralph furiously. "That box does not belong to my father. It was simply in his care for a few months, and he never knew what it contained."

"Well, have it that way if you wish. But, that is not the question. This plate is for the printing of bogus notes, and its possession constitutes a felony. Now, I am going to take that risk, but you will have to do as we direct. The box will remain here, and we will make proper use of it. You come to-morrow evening at eight o'clock, and we will tell you what to do next. Remember that in doing so you will be obeying your father and will be acting for his safety. Marcus and Jacques will see you to the roof of your own house. Good-night."

Ralph strove to speak, but his tongue seemed paralyzed. He was so overcome with the extraordinary experiences of the evening that he could not utter a word. The two dwarfs pointed to the door and strode out of the room. Ralph followed them, but at the foot of the ladder that led to the roof through the scuttle-hole he looked eagerly around for any sign of Garnett. He could not see her, but when half-way up the ladder he could have sworn he heard, like the sigh of a disturbed sleeper, the single word "Help!"

He looked back quickly, but everything was dark and quiet and he was obliged to believe it was his imagination.

"Come!" said Marcus, flashing the light from his bull's-eye lantern in Ralph's face. "It grows late and your absence may be noticed."

Ralph quickened his movements, scaled the ladder, passed over the roofs and reached the scuttle that led to his own house.

Here he bade the dwarfs "Good-night." They retraced their steps without another word, their white hair looking ghost-like in the moonlight, while he descended to the parlor where he had been playing the organ earlier in the evening. A brilliant light from a chandelier made the apartment look cheerful while the sounds of footsteps and conversation in the basement gave token that the servants had returned. Ralph sat down to the organ and under the soothing influence of the music almost forgot the mys-

terious dwarfs and the dispiriting events of the last couple of hours.

At last he arose from his seat as the silvery strokes on the bell of a handsome French clock on the mantle-piece chimed out the hour of midnight.

"No more playing to-night," he said. "I will just go around to the stable and look at the horses and then to bed. I wonder what will be the end of my adventure with the three dwarfs and their witch-like mother. I feel doubtful about the wisdom of my doing as I did. I let them have their own way about that box too easily, I am afraid. And yet, it was for my father's sake! I believed I was doing the only thing that could deliver him from a frightful peril. Second sight, clairvoyance and all the rest of those sciences that border on the supernatural are but little understood as yet, and I cannot doubt the truth of the visions that lovely girl described in her mesmeric state. But," and here the young man looked troubled as a thought obtruded itself that he had tried in vain to banish from his mind, "suppose she is a conspirator with those devilish Renaires, and that the whole thing was a farce performed for my benefit, or rather for their own, having for its object the obtaining of that box from me, and the forcing of me to their will in other ways! But, psuaw! that cannot be! I will not think of it."

He walked through the main hall of the house, and at the back came to a door that led down a short flight of steps into a garden. The moon was still shining, though getting low in the heavens, and he could easily see his way along. He walked down the pathway to the extreme end of the garden, through a gate of lattice-work and into the stable-yard. The stamping of hoofs and the rustling of straw beckoned the proximity of the horses.

Ralph drew a pass-key from his pocket and unlocked the door of a large, roomy stable. A loud neigh greeted him.

"Still, Jasper! Be still, old boy, until I get a light," said Ralph, in soothing tones.

He felt along the wall inside and found a lantern, which he lighted and hung up again in the same place.

The light disclosed a square apartment, in which two horses were allowed to roam at will. No halter chains restrained them, but both were given full control of their movements within the confines of the stable.

One of the horses was a fine black specimen of the equine race, with a proudly arching neck, wide nostrils and small ears. His coat was as glossy and soft as satin, while his large, intelligent eyes rested on Ralph with an expression that was almost human.

The other occupant was a white mare, who formed a splendid contrast to her sable companion. Rather smaller than he, she yet bore all the signs of good blood, and one's first thought on seeing them together was that each was a worthy mate for the other.

"Well, Jasper, old fellow," said Ralph, gently stroking the neck of the black. "I guess you miss your master, don't you? He has been away three days now, and I don't know any more about him than you. But then he has been absent for a much longer time many times before, and always came back all right. So I shall not worry myself this time. Would you, Jasper?"

The noble beast whinnied and pushed his nose down against Ralph's heart as if he understood what he had said and was desirous of offering consolation.

"I do wonder where he has gone this time and what business he transacts when away from home. How many times he has ridden out of the city on your back, Jasper, and come back two or three days after, tired out, and with you in the same condition. Ah, Jasper! There is a mystery about it, but I trust it does not mean mischief, or—or—disgrace."

The boy's voice faltered as he uttered the last word, and his head sunk on his breast as if he already felt the weight of what he hardly dare name.

"Well, good-night, Jasper, and good-night, Nellie. I have hardly noticed you, old girl, have I?"

The white mare edged over to him and he was about to stroke her nose when he started back so suddenly that he made the mare plunge as if she had been struck with a whip.

"Surely I saw her face at that window!" muttered Ralph, hoarsely. "It could not have been fancy. Yes, there it is again! What can it mean?"

His gaze was fixed on a small window that overlooked the yard of the next house, and he seemed as if petrified.

There was a face at the window, and it looked like the face of a corpse!

"Oh, mother! mother! It is you! I am sure of it. Speak, if you can, and tell me what you wish. From what land do you come? If it is you in the flesh, wait one instant. But if you be a spirit, signify your desire!"

Ralph had spoken these words in imploring tones, scarcely knowing what he said. His mother had disappeared, two years ago, leaving no trace behind, and he had long mourned her as dead. Now that he saw the well-loved fea-

tures under such strange circumstances, looking so familiar and yet so awful he was well-nigh beside himself.

A long, thin white hand was raised by the side of the face and beckoned to him. At the same time the dark eyes rolled in their sockets, as if their owner were in pain, mentally as well as physically.

"Mother!" burst from Ralph.

The eyes fixed themselves upon him with an earnest gaze.

"Mother! I come!"

Ralph ran out of the door into the yard. The moon had gone down and it was very dark.

He groped his way along the side of the stable until he came to a low brick wall that separated the yard from that attached to the next house.

Through the gloom he could distinguish a mass of white drapery, and the ghastly visage he had seen at the window showed clearly in the light that shone through the casement from the lantern in the stable.

"Mother! Mother!" repeated Ralph.

The figure stretched out its hands toward him and was apparently about to speak, when suddenly, a scuffling noise was heard, the white-robed appearance vanished as if it had melted away, and in its place was the insignificant figure and white head of Victor Renaire, his evil countenance made still more unprepossessing by a grin that might have been borrowed from Satan himself.

CHAPTER V.

ANGEL CAMP.

WHEN the Pacific Detective went over the precipice to his doom, Black Bart turned and walked over to the two men who had so effectually relieved him.

Their dress was very similar to his own, and both were armed with revolver and knife.

"Guess we settled him this time, Bart," said one. "He was very near the camp, and he might have stumbled on it if we hadn't given him the swing off."

"It is a bad business, though, boys," said Black Bart. "You know I don't like the killing business. I never killed a man in my life and I hope I never shall."

"Why, Bart, what's the matter with you? Blame my cats, if that isn't ungrateful! Here we got you away from a fellow that was totting you around like a b'ar on the end of a string, and then you say it's a bad business, because he kind of tripped over. You can't mean it, surely."

"No, Bill, I know you did the best you could. Here's my hand. Shake!"

Black Bart and Bill shook hands, and the threatened disagreement was smoothed over.

"Well, Bart, we are all ready for you. You will find the rest of the boys in camp. Suppose we get along. He didn't take your rifle with him when he jumped over, but I'm afraid he has your pop and toothpick. Never mind, we will soon fix you up again. I suppose you did not make much of a strike this time, did you?"

"No," answered Bart. "I have come back poorer than I went."

While talking thus the three men were walking slowly away from the edge of the cliff towards a clump of trees that stood some few hundred yards back.

Suddenly, one by one, they vanished—seemed to sink into the ground.

Not a sign of them could be seen, and yet there was no opening observable in the apparently solid earth.

A closer inspection, however, would have revealed the fact that in the trunk of the largest tree was a slight depression about three feet from the ground. The bark was knotted and gnarled, and it would have been almost impossible for a stranger to have noticed anything peculiar about it. Yet in this little depression consisted the key to the mystery of the sudden disappearance of Black Bart and his two companions.

Hidden in the dint, where it could not be seen by any one passing, was a small knob. On pushing this knob a large section of the bark swung outward on hinges, disclosing an opening about five feet high by two wide, through which a man could easily crawl.

But where had the three men gone?

Inside the trunk there was not room for more than one, and yet three had entered and disappeared.

Here is the explanation. Each man as he entered the tree closed the opening after him. The act of replacing the bark door unfastened a trap door in the bottom of the tree. This trap was so ingeniously made and was so carefully concealed that no one would have suspected its existence. It looked like the base of the hollow tree, and with its loose earth, and dried leaves, one could have sworn that it had been undisturbed since the devastating thunderbolt struck the sturdy trunk and dried up its life-sap.

In one corner, however, hidden by the rubbish, was a small iron ring. A finger introduced into this ring was sufficient to enable its owner to raise the trap and show a wooden ladder leading into a square apartment, braced up

with rough unhewn logs and presenting the appearance of a disused mine.

Bill Watkins, who had had the controversy with Black Bart, was the first to make his way to the subterranean chamber, whither he was immediately followed by Black Bart and his companion, Sam Shaw.

It was pitch dark, but all seemed to know their way, and the gloom did not trouble them.

They walked on, threading their way among the huge timbers that kept the earth from falling about their ears, until Bill, who was in advance, stopped. Then he knocked three times on what looked like the solid wall, but was in reality a small door. Then a squeak like that of a rat was heard.

"Safety!" said Bill, with a peculiar emphasis on the last syllable.

"How many?" queried a hollow voice.

"Three from the stars," returned Bill.

"How much do they know?"

"All."

"Let them give the countersign and the secret word."

A ray of light shot out from a round hole just large enough for a man's hand to squeeze through. Bill thrust in his hand for a minute and then withdrew it quickly, the hole being immediately closed.

"It is well," said the hollow voice once more.

"Now the word."

Bill placed his mouth close to the door and whispered a monosyllable.

"You are a true follower of Angel Camp," came from the hollow voice. "Let the others satisfy me and you shall all enter the sacred portal."

Bart and Sam Shaw each did the same as Bill had done, and the hollow-voiced individual expressed himself as convinced that they were entitled to be recognized as Angel Camp men.

There was the sound of bolts sliding back and keys turning in locks, and the jarring of a heavy bar being removed. Then the door swung open and the three new-comers were almost blinded by the flood of light that burst upon them after being in pitch darkness for the last quarter of an hour. The door was closed and fastened behind them directly they had passed in.

It must not be supposed, however, because there was a good light, that the scene was a brilliant one.

A number of coal-oil lamps were fastened on the walls of the apartment, which was the counterpart of that Bart and his companions had passed through, save that this was furnished and the other was not.

A long, rough table occupied the center of the room, and around it were gathered a dozen men, whose dress and appearance proclaimed the reckless, wild lives they led. They were of all nationalities. Here the red hair and square chin of an Irishman was seen next to the stolid features of a German, while John Bull was represented in the Sam Shaw with whom we are already acquainted. Then there were two or three New Englanders, a couple of Chicagoans, and several others who didn't know or wouldn't tell where they were from. As it would have been considered a breach of etiquette to press a gentleman on this point when he showed an unwillingness to talk about it, there was no difficulty about allowing their origin to remain in doubt.

Every man carried a six-shooter and a knife, while a stack of repeating rifles in one corner gave evidence that every opportunity for a fusilade was presented by the weapons at hand.

A peculiar feature of the room was the number of plush-covered seats scattered around. They had evidently been taken from the parlor cars of railroad trains, though how they had found their way to this secret habitation could only be guessed.

It might have been expected, from the impressive nature of the ceremony attending the admittance of members to the room, that some sort of dignity would be observed by those inside. On the contrary, everything was extremely free-and-easy. The discussion of a meal was in progress when Black Bart and the others entered, and there was no interruption of the jaw-exercise, save such as was involved in a "Howdy, Bart," from a mouth full of bread, Bologna and mustard, when the owner took the trouble to exert himself to that extent. Two demijohns of whisky were circulating in a rather lively fashion, and were seldom passed along without paying tribute to every thirsty soul on the line of march.

Seated by the door, with a pipe in his mouth, was the man who had admitted them, and who, having locked, bolted and barred the door again, was apparently resting himself until some pressing need for exertion should arise.

Addressing this man, Bill Watkins said:

"Call the boys to order, Frank; Black Bart has something to say to them."

The doorkeeper took his pipe out of his mouth, and yelled out in tones anything but gentle:

"Here, you fellows, quit gassing, and listen to Black Bart's speech. Mike Hannigan, I'm looking at you. You are making as much noise as a circus procession."

A deathlike stillness followed this outburst,

and the delinquent Mike looked as sheepish as a school-boy caught stealing apples.

Then Black Bart advanced to the head of the table, took off his hat and said: "Boys, since I saw you last I have played to hard luck. I held up the Santora stage and thought everything was going lovely, when all at once I found somebody inside the stage that knocked all the nerve out of my arm and all the spring out of my courage. Then a tenderfoot got the drop on me, and Joe nearly got his knife into my gizzard."

"What was you doing to let them get yer in such a fix?" broke in Mike Hannigan.

"I tell you I was broke up completely. If I hadn't been I would never have come to camp without money, and even without my weapons. However, I don't want to talk about myself altogether. It is very certain, from what Sleepless Eye said (curse him!) that Angel Camp is known to the police. They know just about where it is, and the first thing we'll know they will be finding their way down here. Now, though there is no fear of our being caught like rats in a trap while we have so many ways of getting out, I think it would be well to close it up for a little while and scatter until this thing blows over. What do you think about it, boys?"

Black Bart stood leaning carelessly against the table, while his piercing dark eyes roamed from one face to another to see how his suggestion was regarded.

"I don't believe all the detectives in the world could ever find us down here," said Mike Hannigan at last, after silence had reigned for a full minute.

I don't believe in being scared out of our boots just because a detective who is dead now has been blowing of what he knows nothing about," said another.

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

All around the table went the same expression of opinion, and Black Bart stood alone for closing up the camp.

"All right, boys, it is for you to say. I am going away from this part of the country for a week or two, but I'll have to put up another job very soon to pay running expenses. I haven't even got a six-shooter."

"That's so," said Bill Watkins. "I had forgotten that. Here, take mine. I'll get another out of the armory."

Bill handed his derringer and knife to Black Bart, who examined the charges in the former and put the latter in his belt.

"Well, good-by, boys, for the present," said Black Bart. "I suppose I had better go out the other way."

"Yes," said Bill Watkins. "We don't want to open up the trunk entrance again to-night. It is a little dangerous, perhaps."

Black Bart walked through the room and disappeared behind a huge wooden post in one corner that helped to support the roof.

Where he went no one could tell unless he was in possession of the secret. The wall all appeared to be solid rock, without any opening, but Black Bart was nowhere to be seen notwithstanding.

"That is rather strange," muttered Bill Watkins.

"In what way strange?"

"He has gone without leaving any of his poetry for us to remember him by."

"I don't know about that," remarked Sam Shaw. "What's that piece of paper on the floor? It looks to me like one of Black Bart's messages."

"I guess you're right," said Bill, picking up the paper. "Here's some writing on it."

"What does it say?" came from all, in chorus.

"It is not written very plainly, but as near as I can make out it runs:

"Keep your eyes skinned. There is danger quite near,
If you've sense you'll heed this warning,
But just act like men and never show fear,
Or the wolf's fangs may tear you 'fore
morning." **BLACK BART, Po 8.**

"What does that mean, I wonder?" demanded Sam Shaw, after a pause, during which every man looked inquisitorily at his neighbor. "I suppose it is one of Black Bart's wild notions. He would say the devil himself was coming if he could work it into rhyme."

"I don't see why he told us to 'act like men.' I don't think there is anybody here who could be scared by a wolf. If there is, let him own up."

"I ain't afraid of no wolf, be jahers, nor of no officer naythur," put in Mike Hannigan. "That spaldeen, Sleepless Eye, was the last man that give me a scare, and he's in the East, far enough away."

"Pass the demijohn, Mike," cried out a big, burly fellow at the end of the table, "and we'll drink to the health of your friend Sleepless Eye. What do you say, boys?"

"I'm agreeable," assented Mike, "and may he toast his toes when he's after dying, and get a permanent job to fire up below."

"Good!" burst from several.

The demijohns were shoved along the table and every man filled up his tin cup with the fiery liquor.

Bill Watkins raised his cup in the air and

said: "Here's to Sleepless Eye! May he find all the pieces when he gathers himself up from the jagged rocks that line the valley below Angel Camp. Drink deep, boys!"

All raised their tin cups and drained them to the dregs.

"Now, who's going to reply to the toast?" asked Mike.

"I will!" came in startling tones from the corner of the room where Black Bart had disappeared.

All turned quickly and saw—a man with streaks of blood on his pale face and a six-shooter in each hand, while around him were crowded a dozen men, with Winchesters covering every member of the company around the table.

The latter were completely awed. They knew that a movement meant death.

Then the pale man, with the blood on his face, repeated:

"I will reply to it. No one has a better right, for I am Sleepless Eye, the Pacific Detective!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEAD FACE AGAIN.

WHEN Ralph Milton saw the grinning face of Victor Renaire, instead of that of the mother he mourned so sincerely, he felt as if his reason was giving way, and shuddered as if an icy hand were placed over his heart.

"Where is she?" he asked, in faltering tones.

"Hallo, Ralph, what are you doing here at this hour? You ought to have been in bed, long ago," was the dwarf's evasive answer.

"Where is my mother? I saw her just now. What is this terrible power you possess, that can make even the dead return to earth? If it really was my mother that I saw just now, tell me of her and I will do your bidding to the last."

"Tush! You are nervous and excited! Go to bed and you will feel all right in the morning. But don't forget—eight o'clock to-morrow night. Good-night."

And he was gone.

Ralph strained his eyes in his efforts to pierce the gloom for another glimpse of the form of his beloved parent, and then, with a heavy sigh he returned to the stable, locked it up and walked slowly back to the house.

It must not be supposed, however, that he had accepted as truth the denial by Victor Renaire that he had just seen his mother.

No! He resolved that with the morning light he would penetrate the mystery that overhung the house of the Renaires if it cost him his life.

He went to bed and after tossing uneasily on his pillow for an hour sunk into an unrefreshing slumber. He dreamed that Victor Renaire stood at the foot of his bed, holding his mother by the hair threatening her with torture and death while she, with arms outstretched toward her son, begged him to save her. Then the vision faded and he was listening to the voice of Garnett, as she told what she saw in her mesmeric state, while Victor Renaire gazed mockingly at her like a fiend rejoicing in his power. Again the scene changed and he was sitting at the organ, while Victor stood at his side and influenced his fingers so that he could play nothing but discord, while impish beings filled the air and added to the din, driving him nearly crazy. And still, through it all, there was an oppressive weight upon his chest that seemed to be crushing out his very life and freezing his blood, drop by drop. Ah! It was easy to see what the weight was! Victor Renaire was standing there, digging his heels into his chest and wagging his white head at him in derision. He defied the sleeper to shake off the spell and laughed at his efforts to escape from his influence. And yet! Surely this agony could not endure forever. He would save himself from this demon dwarf! Now! One mighty struggle! A loud shriek! Ah! Victory!

Ralph Milton awoke!

He sat up in bed and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He trembled as if he had the ague and he felt hot and cold by turns.

The dull gray of early morn creeping through his casement reassured him. He arose from his bed, threw open the window and let the cool air blow on his fevered brow.

He looked down in the street. All was quiet, save for an early workman here and there, hurrying to his daily toil, or a market wagon rumbling along with its load of fruit and vegetables.

Ralph leaned on the window sill for half an hour thinking over the events of the past night and wondering what would be the end of his acquaintance with games, begun under such strange circumstances.

Suddenly he noticed a man standing opposite, apparently watching the house. The man was respectably though not stylishly dressed, and looked like a well-to-do mechanic. Ralph drew behind the curtains when he first noticed the stranger, but continued to watch him from his place of concealment.

A low whistle brought a companion to the man opposite the house, and the two were quickly joined by another. Then the three walked over to the house and rung the bell. A servant

came to the door and they pushed past her and walked up the stairs.

Ralph could hear them clumping up until they reached the door of his room, which was the same in which Victor Renaire had exercised his power over him and forced him to go with him to the other house.

Ralph who had hardly slipped on his clothes opened the door and indignantly demanded what they wanted.

"Now, simmer down, young feller," said one. "We are officers. Here are our badges under our outside coats, and here is our warrant to search this house."

"Search it? What do you expect to find?"

"You'll know in the course of time. We want to go through this room. We have pretty full directions."

"Search!" said Ralph.

He stood aside and let the three officers pass in.

They went straight to a bureau in the corner of the room and opened a little drawer.

"This is where we were to find it," said one of the officers.

"Yes," said another, "but it don't seem to be here."

They were both tumbling over the things in the drawer in their search for something and a very evident look of disappointment was stealing over their countenances.

"What do you want?" asked Ralph, who was almost stupefied by the extraordinary behavior of the officers.

"Oh, Mr. Ralph," broke in a female voice, as a servant appeared at the door. "It warn't my fault. I went to the door, and these men said they were officers and showed me a paper and said they were going to search the house. And then they pushed past me and came upstairs. Oh! I wish the doctor was at home."

"There, don't worry yourself. Go down-stairs. You did quite right; there is nothing the matter. The officers have made a mistake; that's all. I'll attend to them."

The girl went down-stairs, sobbing with excitement, and Ralph turned to the officers, who were by this time going through the other drawers in the bureau.

"If you will tell me what you are looking for perhaps I can help you," said Ralph, quietly.

"Well, then, it is a small ebony box that we know to be in this house somewhere, and that we have reason to believe is stolen property. Now, if you know where it is hidden you can save a good deal of trouble by bringing it out."

"I don't believe there is such a thing in the house. If there is I certainly don't know where."

"That is a pretty thin story," sneered the officer. "We are going to look for it a little longer anyhow."

"Go ahead, my friend," returned Ralph. "But you must excuse me if I leave you to search by yourselves. It is seven o'clock and I generally take a walk about this time. You have not got a warrant for my arrest, I suppose?" he added, with an ironical smile, as he left the room.

"No, but I don't know how soon we may have," said the irate officer, as he turned to assist his companions in their fruitless search.

Ralph walked down-stairs and into the street, taking his course toward the depot.

"Their train ought to be in by this time," he said to himself. "I'll go and see."

At this moment a hack dashed around the corner and came toward him.

"Here they are, now," said Ralph, joyfully, as a pretty girlish face appeared at the window and smiled at him.

The driver stopped and the next minute Ralph had exchanged greetings with the two ladies who had been in the Santora stage-coach that had been stopped by Black Bart.

A few minutes sufficed for the recital of their adventures, and Ralph's eyes flashed and his fists clinched as he wished from the depths of his soul that he could have been there to take the part of his Aunt Susan and sister Pauline.

He thought it better not to tell them anything about the ebony box and the visit of the officers, so when they reached home and were comfortably seated at breakfast in the cheerful dining-room three happier-looking people than the aunt, nephew and niece it would have been hard to find in the great State of California.

Ralph had almost forgotten his worries of the previous night and gave himself up to the unrestrained enjoyment of the comfort of the moment.

The two ladies had been east as far as Chicago, and had much to tell of the wonders of that great City by the Lakes. With the exception of the encounter with Black Bart not a single unpleasant incident had disturbed their pleasure while away, and both declared that they would like to go there at least once more before they died. Indeed, Pauline said something about going every year, but Aunt Susan, who was many years older than her enthusiastic niece, would not listen to such a thing.

"It is too fatiguing a journey to be undertaken too frequently," she said. "Besides, the novelty would soon wear off and you would wish

yourself back home in San Francisco before you had accomplished your second trip. Take my word for it, Pauline. There is no place like home."

"I guess you are right, auntie. I spoke without thought," returned Pauline.

The day passed away quietly for the two ladies.

With Ralph things were not quite so smooth. As soon as breakfast was over he left the dining-room and encountered the three officers in the hall.

"Did you find it?" asked Ralph.

"No, but we have a clew to it," returned the principal officer. "And we propose to follow it up."

"All right. I wish you success. Good-morning."

But the officers were too much annoyed to reply, and left the house in high dudgeon.

Ralph knew too much about the ways of police officers, from reading the daily papers, to place much confidence in what they had said about "a clew." He knew that the average city detective will never confess that he is beaten if it can possibly be helped.

Still, the box troubled him.

It had been placed in his care as a solemn trust by his father and he had let it go out of his hands on the strength of a mysterious command that, after all, might be only a trick.

He was restless and weary all day, and even his organ failed to soothe his spirits.

Evening drew on and it would soon be time to keep his appointment with the Renaires.

He had made up his mind that, come what would, he would make an attempt to penetrate the mystery of his mother's appearance the night before.

Seven o'clock found him standing at the front door, lost in thought. Then a silvery voice broke in upon his meditations:

"In one hour Victor Renaire will expect you."

"Garnett!"

"Yes," shyly. "That is my name."

"What is your other name?" asked Ralph.

"Alas! I know not!" was the reply. "Some people call me Renaire, but Victor says that I am no relation of his, and have no right to bear his name."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Ralph, heartily.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I must go back. Victor told me not to waste my time, and if he gets mad at me—"

"What then?" asked Ralph, quickly. He had taken a great interest in this beautiful girl, apparently so friendless and in such questionable company. Her every look, movement and speech proclaimed innocence and Ralph felt sure that she was kept by the Renaires to serve their own vile purposes in some way, though what, he could not as yet divine. He mentally resolved that he would constitute himself her champion, and, if needs were, would defy even Victor Renaire himself for her sake.

"Tell him I will be there at the time," he said, at last. "I suppose I shall see you, Garnett, eh?"

He took her hand in his.

"Good-by, Garnett."

"Good-by—until eight o'clock."

And she was gone.

"Ralph, who was that girl you were talking to just now?" asked Pauline, as she stepped up behind her brother.

"Oh, she—she—is—that is—I mean—"

"Ah! Ralph. You seem confused. I suppose it is some one you have met at a party. Well, you need not be ashamed of her. She is a lovely girl, and, moreover, very refined in appearance. If I am to have her for a sister-in-law, I only hope she is as good as she is beautiful."

"What nonsense you talk," said Ralph, with a smile. "As if I cannot speak to a young lady without marrying her."

"Well, it looks very suspicious. I noticed you had her hand in yours a moment ago," and Pauline smiled, archly.

"I was only shaking hands and saying good-by."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, I—Great heavens! The dead face!"

CHAPTER VII.

KEEP HIS APPOINTMENT.

At the time the officers were hunting for the ebony box in Ralph Milton's bedroom the men in whose possession it was were engaged in secret counsel in the room where Ralph had been induced to give it up.

"We must do something with that woman," Victor Renaire was saying. "That young man is pretty sharp and he will discover her sooner or later if we don't put her out of the way."

"You don't mean—" said Marcus, with a significant gesture.

"Cut her throat?" said Victor. "No, that would be too dangerous. Besides, it would upset all our plans. No. I think we'll have to try and get her down to Angel Camp."

"How?" put in Jacques.

"I will find the means."

"When is it to be done?"

"At once."

"To-day?"

"I'm afraid we can hardly manage it until to-morrow," returned Victor. "But we must keep her under close watch to-night while Ralph is here."

"Do you think we can make him join us in our business?" asked Marcus. "I have felt considerable misgivings since last night."

"You are easily discouraged, brother. I tell you I can do with him as I please. With what we know of his family history, we can put the screw on so tightly that he will beg to be allowed to come in. Mark my words if it is not so!"

Victor Renaire said this with a grin of devilish malignity on his shriveled features, which spread to those of his two brothers, and the three looked as if a hangman's rope for each was the only thing necessary to complete their equipment.

"Hush, my children. Here is Garnett," said the old woman. "Ah, well—ah—well! She's young—she's young, and I suppose she thinks she is pretty. It is many years since I was like her. Many years—many years!"

She hobbled over to the door, shot back a heavy bolt, and admitted the young girl.

"Well, Garnett, did you get the things?" queried Victor, sharply.

"Yes, Victor, but I couldn't change the twenty-dollar bill," said the girl, in a timid voice.

"Why not?"

"Well, I went to the old man at the butcher's shop, and asked for some steak. Then I offered him the twenty-dollar bill, but he said he hadn't got change. Then I told him that was all the money I had, and he said I had better take the meat and pay him some other time. And—and—here's the steak and the bill."

"Curse the steak!" cried Victor, savagely. "Go to your room."

The girl seemed glad to escape and needed no second bidding.

"We have got to raise money somehow to-day," said Victor, as soon as Garnett disappeared. "Marcus, you had better go out and work off a hundred or two somehow. It must be done."

"Very well," said Marcus. "Hadn't Jacques better try it, too?"

"No; I want him to help me. I have to make arrangements to get the old woman to Angel Camp to-morrow. I only hope she won't get troublesome to-night, and give Ralph another chance to see her. He evidently didn't swallow my explanation that he was the victim of an optical delusion last night."

Victor Renaire opened a small iron safe set into the wall by the side of the fireplace, and took out the ebony box. He examined the plate contained in it long and earnestly by the window.

At last he put it down, and muttered:

"It isn't safe to leave that in the safe. I expect I had better put that with the rest of the material."

"Well, I am going, Victor," said Marcus. "I don't suppose I shall be back much before supper."

He put a stove-pipe hat on his head, and taking an umbrella, looked, with his white hair, like a respectable old gentleman, connected with a bank or similar institution.

"Now, Jacques," said Victor, as soon as the door had been shut and bolted after Marcus; "perhaps we had better have her in here and make her understand that she has to keep quiet to-night."

"Very good," assented Jacques. "Shall I bring her in?"

"Yes."

Jacques moved the bed in the corner of the room, and sliding back a panel, disclosed a small apartment, or rather, closet, in which there was just room for the pallet that filled it, with a space about two feet wide by its side.

Upon the pallet lay an elderly woman, her worn face yet showing the remains of great beauty. Her large, dark eyes were bright and shaded by long lashes, while her clean-cut features, her straight nose and lofty brow proclaimed her one of intellect and refinement.

As the panel slid back, she raised herself from her pillow and looked wearily at Jacques.

"What fresh indignities do you wish to inflict upon me?" she asked. "For well I know that your visit bodes me no good."

"Get up!" was Jacques's curt reply.

The lady did as commanded, but there was an air of weariness about her movements that gave evidence of weakness. She stood by the side of her pallet bed in a white night-dress, and placed her hand against the wall to steady herself.

"Come along," said Jacques. "Victor wants to talk to you."

She followed him into the room and Jacques carefully closed the panel and replaced the bed.

Victor motioned to her to sit down near the fire. She sat down and looked straight in his eyes. He returned the glance for a moment and then shifted his gaze.

"Madame Ponoisi," he commenced.

"Why do you call me by that name?" she interrupted. "You know it is not mine. Is it necessary to add that insult to the long list of injuries I have suffered at your hands?"

"It is no insult," returned Victor; "and if it were you would have to suffer it while it suited my purpose."

"Alas! Yes; I suppose so."

"However, that is neither here nor there. I have brought you here to give you notice to prepare for a journey to-morrow."

"A journey?"

"Yes. You will ride on the cars for a hundred miles, and then by stage for about twenty-five more. You will go with me and you will pass as my wife."

A gleam of hope shone from the black eyes of the invalid.

Victor saw it and rightly guessed its import, as he went on: "Perhaps you think you may escape on the road. Well, you may as well dismiss any such idea, for at the first sign of rebellion on your part I will put you under the mesmeric influence and make you accuse yourself of—"

"No, no," moaned the lady. "I will do your bidding."

"It is well. Now I have one more thing to say."

"I am listening."

"We shall have a stranger in this room this evening—one who is with us hand and glove. He is coming for a little social enjoyment, and I don't want him disturbed by any noise from you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I—I will be silent."

"Mind you do. Now, as you are out here, you may as well have your breakfast before going back into retirement."

At a sign from Victor his mother placed some tea, bread and meat before Madame Ponoisi and then stood watching her as she ate a little bread and drank a cup of tea in a spiritless manner.

In about ten minutes, the invalid turned away from the uninviting meal and looked at Victor, as if asking what she should do next.

"Take her back, Jacques," said he, and the poor creature, was soon in her confined quarters, with the panel closed and the bed in its place as before.

Victor and Jacques went out, after directing their mother to keep the place fastened up and not to let Garnett go out all day.

The Renaires occupied the top floor of the large residence, and were as much of a mystery to the family who lived in the lower part and rented the rooms to them as they were to the general public. However, as they paid their rent regularly and never made any untoward noise their statements that they were interested in certain mines outside the city, and that the lady, Madame Ponoisi, and Garnett, were near relatives, were perforce accepted without question.

They had been living in the house for three years, but had been so seldom on the street in daylight that they were but little known by the neighbors.

Ralph Milton, who had been away at college for four years until within six months past had never seen them before his peculiar introduction of the night before, or, if he had seen them, had certainly passed them without notice. Now that their lives were becoming so unexpectedly interwoven with his he naturally felt curious as to their antecedents. In Garnett especially he took an interest such as had never inspired him in the whole course of his young life before. Who was she? Why was she with the Renaires? And what was the peculiar power that bound her so tightly to Victor Renaire?

These were the thoughts that filled Ralph Milton's brain when, as the hands of the clock neared the figures that would register eight o'clock, he climbed the ladder that led to the roof of the house and prepared to keep his appointment.

He had told his aunt and sister that he had a headache, and resisting their efforts to make him submit to a number of feminine remedies for the malady, had declared his intention of going to bed and had retired to his room.

He had armed himself with a small pearl-handled revolver in case of necessity and had then quietly fastened his bedroom door and escaped without any one in the house knowing that he had left his room.

He was disturbed over the reappearance of the dead face in the street shortly before, as narrated in the last chapter.

For one instant only had he seen it, and then it had vanished in a group of laughing school-girls who were passing along on the sidewalk opposite.

He had rushed across the street with the determination of finding it and settling his doubts as to whether it was really the face of his mother or not.

His chilled feeling of awe can easily be understood and it weighed heavily upon him when he walked over the roof to face Victor Renaire and hear what he was to do in the unlawful business carried on by the dwarf.

"Here you are, Ralph," was his greeting from Victor as he descended the ladder in the lat-

ter's house and presented himself at the door of the room in which he had listened to the revelations of Garnett at his last visit.

"Yes, I am on time, I think."

"Just eight o'clock. Tis well. Mother, light the lamps."

The apartment had hitherto been in darkness save for the rays of the moon that streamed through the windows and held fantastic revels on the white heads of the three dwarfs, who were flitting hither and thither without any apparent definite purpose. The lamps on the walls were quickly alight, however, and the windows were closed with inside shutters.

Ralph was dazzled at first, but gradually his eyes became accustomed to the glare and he glanced around the room.

Then he gave a start and a glad cry of surprise.

"Father!"

"Well, my son!"

A tall, close-shaven gentleman, dressed in a good suit of black, with white collar and tie, and white cuffs showing at the wrists, arose from a chair in the corner of the room, and walked toward Ralph.

"Why, father, when did you get back?"

"This evening."

"Did you—did you—know—about the—the ebony box?" asked Ralph, falteringly.

"Victor Renaire has told me."

Victor Renaire, who was standing behind Ralph, facing the father, here made a warning gesture to the latter.

"He told me it was for your sake, and therefore I gave it to him. Was it the truth he told me, or was I deceived? If he played me false it will be the worse for him."

Victor Renaire said not a word, but kept his eyes fastened on those of the father.

There was some secret understanding between the two, and the power that Victor Renaire seemed to exercise over so many people evidently extended to this quiet, sedate, gentlemanly Doctor Milton who had returned so unexpectedly to his son, and who had been found by him in this house apparently on intimate terms with a family of doubtful character.

"Father, why do you not answer me?" repeated Ralph.

"Yes, why don't you answer him, Doctor Milton?" broke in Victor, with a scarcely perceptible sneer. "He will not take my word for it, it seems."

Another quick interchange of glances between Victor and Dr. Milton, a prayer for mercy in that of the older man and a stern refusal in the dwarf's, and then the doctor said, slowly:

"You did quite right, Ralph. Victor had a perfect claim on the box, and—"

"Traitor!" moaned a despairing female voice that seemed to come from the very midst of the group in the room.

"Mother!" cried Ralph, wildly, and flew at the throat of Victor Renaire.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SEVERED STRAND.

WHEN Black Bart left Angel Camp he found himself, as soon as he was outside the hidden doors, standing on a narrow ledge about half-way down the face of the precipice on the brink of which he had stood some time before with the Pacific Detective watching the Express train, as it rushed on its way to the City of the Golden Gate.

Above him for a hundred feet, was a steep wall broken into rifts here and there, while far below was the rock-strewn valley, toward which the detective had been hurled by Bill Watkins and Sam Shaw.

Apparently he was as much cut off from the world where he stood as if he had been riding on the night clouds that sped across the face of the moon in wild flights that ended he knew not where.

For a moment he stood still in the shadow of the cliff, while he gazed around him as if seeking for some means of escape. But that was not his object. He had been here before and knew perfectly well how to reach the valley when he wished to do so. He wanted to assure himself that his movements were unwatched by some hidden enemy. Apparently he was satisfied, for, after feeling his revolver and knife to make sure that they were safe in his belt, he muttered to himself:

"Now for Frisco! I must be there by to-morrow night, come what will."

He stooped down and looked over the ledge into the darkness below.

All was quiet.

"Ugly place, if a fellow wasn't careful," murmured Black Bart. "I guess I'll find all that remains of that Sleepless Eye, when I get down there."

At this moment the form of a man which had been lying flat on the ledge, partly hidden by a bush that was struggling for existence against the face of the precipice, half arose to a kneeling posture.

A pair of glittering eyes were fixed on Black Bart.

Black Bart turned half around and the form sunk into its former prostrate position noiselessly, but swiftly.

The moonlight, which had flashed upon the narrow platform was suddenly shut off behind a bank of clouds.

Black Bart passing along the edge of the cliff, soon disappeared over it, from the view of the man lying down by the bush.

Like a flash the detective was on his feet and hastening to the edge peered over into space.

"Curse the fellow! He has escaped me this time, but I will have him yet," he growled.

Meanwhile Bart was making the best of his way to the valley below.

When he vanished over the edge of the rock-platform he let himself down to another projection about five feet below. It did not protrude more than a foot, but there was a recess in the rock that allowed a man to crawl in out of sight of a person standing above. This it was that baffled the detective. When he spoke Black Bart gave a start, but that was all. The robber had no idea that Sleepless Eye was alive, and when he heard his voice just above him it only increased his determination to get away from that spot with all convenient speed.

"That fellow must either be the devil or his brother," he said. "A man that can be pitched down 200 feet and then climb up again within half an hour knows a little too much for me, and I don't want to interfere with him when I have other business on hand."

He listened intently for a few minutes.

"He must be gone, I guess. I suppose he'll find his way into Angel Camp. If he has got as near as the outside door, he won't have much trouble to get in."

Black Bart was mistaken this time.

Sleepless Eye felt convinced, from the methodical way in which Black Bart went over the cliff that he had some means of getting down other than falling and trusting to his luck to alight in a soft place. Therefore, while Black Bart was congratulating himself that his pursuer had given up the chase, the Pacific Sleuth was lying flat, peeping over the edge of the cliff.

In a few minutes his vigilance was rewarded.

Black Bart appeared on the ledge just below, with a rope in his hand. He was stooping.

Sleepless Eye could almost have touched him, but waited to see what would be the next proceeding.

Bart let the rope hang down to its full length—about fifty feet. The end he held in his hand was provided with a large iron hook. This he attached to a strong staple fastened into the rock, having apparently been placed there for this very purpose.

"I guess that is all right. Now for the next landing," and Bart seized the rope and slid rapidly down.

He had got half the length of the rope when a voice above shouted:

"Hold! Not another inch!"

The only effect of this command was to make Black Bart accelerate his speed.

Another effort and he would be safe!

Then a cry of dismay escaped him.

The line had snarled at the bottom, forming a tangle that shortened it by about ten feet.

He was helpless!

Sleepless Eye had drawn a bull's-eye lantern from his pocket, and sent a shaft of light full on the robber as he dangled sixty feet above the gulch at the foot of the precipice.

"Climb up, Bart! I have you foul."

"Never!"

"If you don't come up before I count three, I'll send a bullet through the rope and drop you."

"Shoot, then, and be hanged!"

Bang!

The Pacific Detective fired, partly severing the rope.

"Will you surrender? Another shot will settle it," cried Sleepless Eye, as he leveled his pistol again.

"Never!" was the retort, as Black Bart strove to kick the tangle out of the rope below him. "You couldn't hit the rope again if you were to fire a dozen shots."

"The rope is coming apart. The strands are giving way one by one," answered the detective from above.

"You are a liar!" yelled Black Bart.

Bang!

Another shot from that almost unerring revolver and Black Bart was hanging by only a strand.

"Good-by, Bart. I'm sorry for you. But you would have it that way," said the detective. "I didn't want to shoot you, because I thought you would have too much sense to force me to extreme measures. Ah! you are coming up, are you?"

Black Bart was climbing as rapidly as he could to reach the place where the rope was cut.

"Quick, now!" yelled Sleepless Eye. "Now up with your right hand. Grab it just above!"

Black Bart made a supreme effort. His left hand was below the place, and his right reached just above it. He grasped the rope convulsively an inch above the single strand.

Sav—!

No! Too late!

The lower end of the rope slips.

Black Bart hangs for a second by his right hand, while he vainly struggles to clutch the rope with his left.

"Hang on!" yelled the detective.

Then, the rope is empty!

"That ends it!" said Sleepless Eye, as he arose. "The fellow has lots of pluck and deserved a better fate. I guess he won't hold up any more coaches now. That is one comfort. In any case, I have done my duty."

He turned toward the entrance of the cavern that bore the name of Angel Camp.

With the inquisitive instinct of the true detective he no sooner discovered the partially hidden door than he determined to see where it would lead him. Besides, he saw no way of getting off this little ledge except by some such streak of luck as appeared to be offered by this door.

A very cursory examination enabled him to find the fastenings and he made his way into the heart of Angel Camp and presented himself before the astonished Angels in the manner already narrated.

But, what of Black Bart?

In his moment of extreme peril his presence of mind did not forsake him. Moreover, he knew every inch of the bluff on the face of which he had been hanging. The chances of his losing his grip were studied by him as he swung himself above the break in the rope, and, with set teeth, he determined not to give up without a struggle.

As the rope parted he drew himself together and held his breath in the concentration of his faculties upon the task set for him by Fate.

Immediately beneath him he knew, though he could not see, that there was a little mountain cedar growing out from the cliff. Its strength was but slight, but if he could drop on it in a certain position it would hold his weight and give him time to think what he should do next.

Down he went!

Though it was but a second, it seemed minutes.

His feet touched the tree!

Crash!

He had broken right through, and now nothing could save him from being dashed a bleeding mass on the jagged rocks below!

Not yet! His right hand, though cut and bruised from its sliding down the rope, had caught an overhanging branch and held him.

He got hold with his left hand, braced his feet against the cliff, and then, with a mighty exercise of strength, drew himself up into the tree; and when he at last worked himself into a place of safety, he felt as if he must give a whoop of triumph. He restrained himself, however, and cast about for a method of reaching the ground. He was still some forty feet above the ground, and there was nothing to break his fall if he dropped from the little tree.

Black Bart was not the man to lose time in escaping from a difficulty.

He drew his bowie-knife from his belt and examined it. Then he replaced it, leaning well toward the cliff, and drew a piece of cord from his pocket and proceeded to lash the knife securely to the palm of his right hand, the point of the blade downward.

"So far so good! Now comes the ticklish part of the job," he said.

Gently he let himself down until he hung by his left hand. Then he thrust his knife into a crevice that ran horizontally along the face of the bluff. He made sure that his knife and the hand that held it had secured a good solid hold. Then he cautiously let go with his left hand and hung by his right, with his feet swinging loosely against the cliff.

"There should be a place for my foot somewhere. I'm sure I calculated correctly," he said, as he felt along the rocks with his toe.

"Ah! here it is!"

He slipped both feet into a little crack big enough to hold them and reached down with his left hand until he found a projection that afforded him a slight hold.

With both feet supported and a hold for his hand he felt it safe to loosen his knife from the crevice and stoop low enough to get another place for it. He knew the place so well that he struck it exactly. Then he removed his feet from their resting-place, hung by his hands and repeated all his previous maneuvers, over and over again until he was within ten feet of the ground.

Perhaps as he was so near the end of his perilous journey he became a little less careful, or perhaps he was thoroughly exhausted. Whatever the cause, in reaching down to find a lodgment for his knife, his feet slipped, he made a wild plunge at the rock with his knife, missed it and came tumbling down into the gulch!

For a moment he lay half stunned. Then he came to himself, and as he raised himself into a sitting posture, exclaimed:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!"

He unashed his knife, put it in his belt, and slowly arose to his feet.

"Nothing but a few bruises, I guess. Now, for Frisco."

He struck out through the gulch and made his way as fast as he could to the track of the Union Pacific Railroad, which wound along the valley

within a quarter of a mile of the spot upon which he had fallen.

A small flag station was soon reached.

Before getting there, however, he had turned off the road for a few minutes. When he came back he had a bundle under his arm.

The station was quiet. The station agent and signal-man, all in one, was nodding over his telegraph instrument, which kept up its ceaseless clicking, as messages were pouring over the wires from points East and West.

Black Bart slipped around to the back of the little office. He never came back.

A man walked out from the place where Black Bart had disappeared, with a bundle that was either the same one that the robber had taken with him, or so much like it that one could not detect the difference.

The stranger was a stout, well-built man, with close-shaven face and glittering black eyes. He was dressed in a fashionable black suit, with white collar and tie and white cuffs. He looked like a banker or a well-to-do merchant.

There had been no sound of a struggle behind the little office, but Black Bart had disappeared as completely as if swallowed by an earthquake.

In half an hour the San Francisco Express came along. It was flagged by the station agent and the close-shaven gentleman stepped quietly on board and was whirled in the direction of San Francisco.

We have already met him under the name of Dr. Milton.

CHAPTER IX.

TABLES ARE TURNED.

If a shell had exploded in Angel Camp it could not have produced greater dismay than did the sudden appearance of Sleepless Eye and his men.

Had he not been seen to go over the bluff headlong by two of the men present?

Could they not have sworn that his bleeding remains were scattered over the rock-strewn pass two hundred feet below?

And yet! Here he was, in the life, perfectly calm and collected. In fact the only self-possessed man in the assemblage!

It was inexplicable?

Sleepless Eye looked at each of the men in turn, and then repeated, slowly:

"Yes, I will reply to the toast, in the absence of any one with a better right."

"This beats the devil!" ejaculated Bill Watkins, drawing a deep breath.

"For your kind remembrance of me, gentlemen, I beg to return my most sincere acknowledgments, and at the same time, I beg to inform you that I have every man in the room covered, and that a movement until I give you permission means death!"

"Ye'r a dhrity loyar!" yelled Mike Hannigan, as he drew a revolver.

Bang! Bang! went a couple of pistols, and Mike was lying on the floor with a bullet in his heart.

"When I say a thing, I generally mean it," answered Sleepless Eye, coolly, as he kept his six-shooter, still smoking, ready for further action. "When a man draws on me he's got to do it quickly. Mike's bullet is sticking in the floor somewhere, I suppose. But you had better not dig it out just now. I am not alone, by a very large majority, and some of my men might shoot if you moved too quickly."

There was something in the resolute tone and manner of the detective that cowed the men who were addressed, and it would have done so even had he not been backed up by an imposing force.

"What do you want us to do?" asked Bill Watkins.

"In the first place I want every mother's son of you to put your weapons on the table and then get up to the other end of the room," returned the Pacific Detective.

"That's what!" put in a man by the side of the detective, who appeared to be Sleepless Eye's first lieutenant.

"Suppose we don't do it?" said Bill.

"You will do it!" was the detective's quiet reply.

"Yes, you will," from the first lieutenant.

"Hurry up!" commanded Sleepless Eye.

There was a look of disgust and rebellion from one or two, but a glance from the piercing blue eye of the Sleepless Eye was enough, and, slowly, one by one, they piled up revolvers and bowie-knives on the table and marched sullenly to the extremity of the apartment, where they stood scowling upon the detective and his posse.

"Now, Colonel Blunt," Sleepless Eye spoke to his first lieutenant, "you take the ropes and fix them up for the journey. We shall have to get them to Calaveras as soon as possible. By the way, Blunt, come here."

Blunt stepped up to Sleepless Eye and the latter whispered:

"Can you depend on your men?"

"I think so, judging from their talk," in the same low tone.

"Talk is cheap, and I'll keep my eye on them."

All this time the men who were at the back of the Pacific Detective had stood perfectly still, with their rifles ready for business, and their

watchful eyes following every movement of the crowd huddled together.

Blunt stepped on toward Bill Watkins with a rope and a stout stick in his hand. He was about to push the latter through Bill Watkins's arms and across his back, and to secure it with the rope when Sam Shaw cried out, with a peculiar accent, the single word:

"Renaire!"

Instantly the men behind Sleepless Eye dropped the butts of their Winchesters to the ground with a rattle and from among them came, sharply and distinctly:

"Ponoisi!"

The Pacific Sleuth made a movement to turn around, but, ere he could do so, he was seized and tied up with a stick and rope in the manner that Blunt was about to apply to Bill Watkins.

At the same moment Blunt was overpowered by the Angel Camp men and tied up with his own fastenings.

"Traitors!" cried the detective.

"Oh, not so bad as that," said one of his late followers. "We don't owe you anything and we are not the men to go back on the Brotherhood just because you have a grudge against some of them. Ain't I right, boys?"

"Of course, you are. Rah for the Brotherhood!" his companion cried.

"But you were engaged to help me in their capture and had your own terms. What more did you want?" demanded the detective.

"We didn't know that we should have to break our oath if we carried out our contract with you. As soon as we heard one of the passwords and saw the secret sign of the Brotherhood we knew the jig was up for you. The password is changed every month, so it wouldn't be much good to you in future, if you can get out of this alive," added the speaker, with a sardonic grin.

Sleepless Eye and Colonel Blunt were led to an adjoining room, apparently used for storing plunder. It was about eight feet square and was half-full of miscellaneous articles. Railroad lanterns, cartridge belts, coils of ropes, mail-bags, iron-bound boxes, valises, saddles, bridles and a mass of articles that it would take too long to describe were piled up in a confused heap, while a dozen Winchester rifles were stacked in one corner.

The two prisoners were taken in by Bill Watkins, who then searched their clothing and took away their weapons and all the money that was in their pockets.

"I would like to untie your arms," said Bill, "but I know the rest of them would object."

"Of course we would object!" declared Sam Shaw, who had followed them in. "Just leave them as they are, Bill. We have had enough of Sleepless Eye to know that he is a troublesome customer with his hands loose."

The detective smiled as he listened to this tribute to his prowess.

"Sam, help me to carry away the rifles," said Bill.

The rifles were removed, and the door was closed with a bang and locked and barred on the outside.

"Well, colonel, we are like rats in a trap, eh?" remarked Sleepless Eye. "It is as dark as a nigger's pocket, too."

"Yes, but—Look! Isn't that a star shining away up over our heads? I can hardly be sure myself."

The Pacific Detective looked up a minute, and then said:

"By Heaven! colonel, you are right! There's a narrow shaft leading into the open air from this infernal place, and that's a little bit of sky we can see. If they will only give us half an hour we may fool them yet."

"I don't see how. Here we are, as helpless as trussed chickens, with our elbows tied to our sides, and not a spark of light save that one little twinkling star several thousand miles away. I am afraid we shall never report for duty again."

"Keep a stiff upper lip, colonel. We have been in bad scrapes together before this, and we have always come out all right. This is a time for quick action, not for sitting down to curse our luck."

"Sitting down! I wish we could sit down. But it is too dark for a fellow to squat himself down without knowing just what he is going to get for a rest," grumbled the colonel.

"Hush!" warned Sleepless Eye. "They are getting ready for a jamboree. I guess they will all get drunk in the course of time, and then will be our chance."

"I don't see it. You talk as if we had the use of our hands and arms."

"Leave that to me."

"I will."

"You know that I was a sailor once?"

"Yes."

"And that I can bend a knotted rope with the next man?"

"Yes; but before you can bend you must have fingers to do it with."

"Not necessarily. A good sailor can handle a rope with his teeth!"

"Ah-h-h!" said Colonel Blunt, drawing a long breath. "That's the idea, is it?"

"What do you think of the prospects now?"

demanded the Pacific Detective. "Don't you think that if we are careful we may have the laugh on them, eh?"

Ere the colonel could respond the heavy bar was removed from the outside of the door, and Sam Shaw, his face inflamed with whisky and his step unsteady from the same cause, stumbled into the little room.

He walked around the prisoners, who were dazzled by the sudden glare of light, and after carefully inspecting the fastenings of their arms, appeared satisfied, and walked out without uttering a word.

A crowd of scowling faces from the Angel Campers looked in at the door, but no remark was made by anybody, and in another moment the door was shut with a slam, and secured as before.

"I guess we sha'n't see any more of them for awhile," said Sleepless Eye. "You haven't moved since the door was opened, have you, colonel?"

"No."

"Good; then I can find you. I don't want to stumble over anything, because I feel sure that Sam Shaw, drunk as he is, is listening."

"Heavens! What's that?" said Blunt, starting.

"Nothing to be afraid of," returned Sleepless Eye. "It is only me, and I am going to get your rope off—if I can. Then you can release me."

"All right. But I'm a Chinaman if I didn't think it was a rat nibbling at me."

The ropes had been fastened in an exceedingly scientific manner, with the knot right in the middle of the back.

Sleepless Eye had not over-estimated his ability, however. He was soon tugging away at the knot on his companion's back with his teeth, and with hopeful results.

"Do you feel it giving?" he asked.

"A little."

The detective's teeth again went to work, and the rope loosened in a decided manner.

"How is it now?"

"I can move my arms a little, but they are badly numbed, I am afraid."

Another tug with the Pacific Sleuth's strong teeth and—Colonel Blunt's arms were at liberty.

It must be remembered that the two men were in pitch darkness, and that the sense of feeling was the only one Sleepless Eye had been able to use in releasing his companion.

"Now, colonel, try your hand on me."

"All right. But my fingers are so cramped that I can hardly move them."

Colonel Blunt went to work on Sleepless Eye's bonds, and after bungling over them longer than Sleepless Eye had done with his teeth, at last completed his task, and held the ropes and sticks in his hand.

"Now, what's the next thing?" asked Blunt.

"Hush! Keep quite still for a minute. If that drunken fool out there should open the door now, we should be gone up."

The two listened for any suspicious sound outside, but all they could hear was the laughter and yells of the men who were enjoying themselves with whisky and card-playing. Everything indicated that the prisoners were forgotten for the time being.

"Now, Blunt, my plan is this: Let us reach that shaft above us and squeeze up until we get to outer air. I don't know exactly where it will bring us out, but that don't matter, as long as we get out. Then we can get a posse and get these fellows yet. But we must be sure of our men next time."

"How are we going to reach the shaft? This room is about nine feet high."

"I'll tell you. That shaft is two feet round. Well, these sticks that they fastened us with are somewhat longer, two feet and a half, at least. I'll tie the end of the cord to the stick. You can't see me, but I have done it, nevertheless (another advantage in being a sailor.) Now, I'll throw the stick up the shaft. Being longer than shaft is wide, it will lodge, and then we can pull ourselves up by the rope one by one."

"A good idea, if you can carry it out," said Blunt.

"I can carry it out," was the quiet but confident reply.

After listening for a moment to make sure there was no suspicion on the part of their jailers, the detective threw up the stick with the rope attached. So dexterously was it done that it caught the first time.

Sleepless Eye pulled on the rope with all his force to make sure that it would bear his weight and then climbed up it hand over hand.

The stick had been thrown with a good deal of force, so that it had lodged about six feet up in the shaft. This enabled the detective to support himself by the sides of the shaft, and he let the rope dangle loose for Colonel Blunt.

"Now, Blunt, quick!" he whispered.

The colonel took hold and in a minute was hanging just below his companion.

"Stay there a minute! Hold tight to me, while I take the stick out, or we sha'n't have room to get any further."

"All right!"

The Pacific Detective dislodged the stick and squeezed himself a little higher.

"Tight squeezing!" he said.

"Very!" assented Blunt, all in a perspiration.
"But I guess we will make it."
Inch by inch they forced themselves nearer to the top and to liberty.
Another yard and they would be safe.
Keep on, man of the Pacific! A last effort!
Already he felt the early morning breezes on his brow, when—
The door below was suddenly flung open and two Winchester rifles were pointed up the shaft.
"We'll give you just two minutes to find your way down!" called out Sam Shaw.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE AGAIN.

WHEN Ralph Milton seized Victor Renaire by the throat he was literally mad with rage. The voice that had broken in with the exclamation "Traitor" was his mother's, he felt sure, and the word she had spoken told him all too surely that she was suffering under wrongs that it was his duty as a son to remove, if possible.

As these thoughts flashed through his brain he tightened his grip on the throat of the dwarf, as he hissed:

"Tell me where she is, or, by heavens! I'll choke you to death!"

Dr. Milton started up and seized his son by the shoulders.

"Ralph, you are foolish. Take your hands away from his throat!"

But Victor shook off his young assailant as easily as if he had been a baby and threw him, panting for breath, on the bed.

"Don't trouble yourself, doctor. He will do me no harm," said Victor. "He is only a boy, remember. He will get more sense as he grows older."

The sneering tone of the dwarf stung the young man, and he was about to make a hot reply when the door opened and Garnett appeared.

Her cheeks were flushed and her beautiful hair hung down her back in rich profusion.

She rushed over to where Ralph was sitting on the bed and said, in trembling tones, in which there was a ring of defiance:

"What are you doing, Victor Renaire? Is it not enough that you have destroyed his moth—"

"Silence!" shrieked the dwarf. "To your room!"

Garnett turned quickly on him, and was about to reply, when she caught his eye fastened on her.

Her face turned deathly pale. She put up her hands in a supplicating manner and then following the direction of his uplifted finger, moved slowly to the door and vanished.

Ralph's first impulse was to follow her, but he reflected that it might result in trouble for her if he were to let Victor Renaire see what an interest he took in the beautiful and apparently friendless girl, so he sat still. He secretly determined to seek an interview with her at the first opportunity, but just now he had other things to engage his attention.

"Victor Renaire," he said, as calmly as he could, "I want to see that person of whom I have twice caught a hasty glimpse, and whose voice I am sure I heard since I entered this room."

"Well, see her. I have no objection," said Victor coolly. "If you can find her."

"Ralph," interposed his father. "You are acting very foolishly. Surely, if there were any likelihood of the voice you say you heard being that of any one connected with ourselves, it would be my duty to take steps in the matter, and I don't think you ever knew me to be lax in my duty. Did you?"

"No, father," returned Ralph, obediently.

"Very well, then, don't think any more about it. We have o'er things to engage our attention this evening."

"Now, Doctor Milton," said Victor, "are you and your son prepared to go into the arrangement I proposed to you the other day?"

"Yes."

"Very well. When can you start?"

"Whenever you please."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Then have yourselves in readiness to take the noon train."

"We will."

"You know what you have to do?"

"Perfectly. Deliver the plate into the hands of the party in Pine Tree Camp and bring back a hundred impressions from it. Then you will manage the rest."

"Yes. That's all right. Then, in consideration of your services I will give you the information you desire."

"Nothing else would induce me to undertake the job," was Dr. Milton's reply.

"You can depend upon me."

"Father, what arrangement are you making? Surely you do not place any confidence in this man?"

"Ralph; you are but a young man yet, and reason with a young man's impetuosity. You will go with me on this mission and I will explain to you on the journey what I think it only right you should know. For the rest, why, just obey me, as you have always done, and everything will be well."

There was a quiet dignity about Dr. Milton that always had an effect upon all with whom he came in contact, and no one was more thoroughly impressed with it than his son Ralph.

"You see that I am able to keep my word with you by this," said Victor, as he touched what looked like the head of a small carpet-tack driven into the wood on the under side of the mantle-piece. A small door opened at the side fireplace and disclosed an opening about a foot square in which was an iron box, fastened with a padlock.

He took out the box, unlocked it and opened the lid. A pile of papers, each one tied up with red tape and indorsed on the back were shown. Victor fumbled among them, and, selecting one, took it and showed Dr. Milton the writing on the back, which was as follows:

"MILTON—PONOISI. Full record. VICTOR RENAIRE."

"When you return, that paper is yours," said Victor.

There was a peculiar gleam in Dr. Milton's eye, and a nervous movement of his hand to his side, as if he half expected to find a weapon hanging outside his respectable black coat. Victor noticed it and edged a little back with the precious paper in his hand.

"You understand, Dr. Milton, when you return; and not then unless everything is satisfactory."

"I understand."

"Well, that is sufficient. Jacques, have you got the agreement ready?"

"Yes, here it is," said Jacques, as he produced a small piece of paper, with a few lines scribbled upon it.

Victor put the paper he had shown Dr. Milton back in the box and returned the letter to its hiding-place, which he closed with a clang.

Then he said: "Sign."

Dr. Milton took the pen offered him by Jacques, and without looking at the paper, wrote his name, "Henry Milton," in a bold hand near the bottom.

The three dwarfs and the old woman looked over his shoulder as he did so, and Victor said: "Now, Ralph."

Ralph took the paper and read it carefully through.

"Father, must I do it?" he asked, beseechingly.

"Sign!" said the three dwarfs in chorus.

"Sign, deary," croaked the old woman.

"Sign, Ralph!" said Dr. Milton.

The young man slowly wrote his name under his father's and threw the pen on the table.

"I feel as if I had sold myself to the—"

"Devil!" broke in the mysterious female voice again.

A dark frown swept across the features of Victor, as Ralph started and glanced swiftly around the room.

But he did not say anything.

"We have nothing else to arrange, I believe," said Dr. Milton, in his frigidly polite manner.

"Nothing. Here is the box," returned Victor.

"I put it here out of sight."

He was walking over to the mantelpiece where there was something covered with a cloth at one end, when there came a loud rapping at the door.

"See who is there, mother," said Victor, hastily.

"I suppose it is Garnett again."

"Ay, ay! I suppose so," croaked the hag, as she hobbled to the door, and, after unfastening the bolt, threw it wide open.

It was Garnett.

"What now?" asked Victor, sternly.

"Oh, Victor! I cannot—cannot stay in that room by myself. I have the old terrible feeling on me to-night. The feeling that something is lurking in the shadows where the light of my candle cannot penetrate. And I see flickering flames in the darkness that half hide, half reveal the presence I know is there. My senses seem not my own. Though I am quietly in my chair, trying to sew, I am conscious that another Garnett is moving stealthily through the space that intervenes between my bodily self and the corner of the room into which I dare not go. And I hear wailing and moaning, and cursing, and a Babel of tongues talking of things I cannot understand and in strange languages that seem not of this earth. And I— Oh! Ralph, save me!"

She had fallen to the ground, in a deathly swoon.

At the mention of his name in that voice that had already made such a powerful impression on the heart of the susceptible young man, Ralph sprung forward and lifted the drooping form of the beautiful young girl from the floor and placed her tenderly on a chair.

"Water!" he said, hurriedly. "Give me some water! She has fainted!"

"Ay! ay! Only fainted!" said the old woman, as she brought a flask of brandy from a cupboard and forced some between Garnett's teeth. "She will recover easily enough, and then she can work out the purpose of her life."

The three dwarfs and Dr. Milton had not moved to render any assistance, but had stood regarding the impulsive actions of Ralph as if wondering why he was so excited over a small matter.

Garnett rapidly revived under the effects of strong liquor.

She gazed around her in the dazed manner natural to a person recovering from a fainting-fit, and then her eyes met those of Ralph. A deep blush mantled her cheeks and drove away every trace of the deadly pallor that had reigned there just before. A fillip from the rosy finger of the God of Love will do more to bring a maiden back to life than all the stimulants and restoratives in the *Pharmacopæia*, and so it proved with Garnett.

"What must you think of me?" she whispered to Ralph.

"Think of you! Have you not already guessed what I think of you?"

Garnett again raised her eyes to his, and then let them fall. She was learning the lesson of love almost without a teacher.

"I had no right to call you, but indeed, you seemed to be the only friend I had," she went on shyly and in the same low tones. "And I felt so very—very—nervous. But you will forgive me, will you not?"

"Forgive you, Garnett!" the young man answered passionately. "Why, do you not know that I *love* you? Surely you must see it. I know that you are in some trouble—that these Renaires are exercising a supervision over you for which they have no warrant, and, I am determined that I will rescue you, or—"

"What's that?" interrupted Victor. "What are you talking about, Garnett? You seem to be very friendly with that gentleman on a short acquaintance."

He walked toward her and lifted her by the hand, somewhat roughly from the chair.

At his touch she seemed to change her identity. She was no longer the timid shrinking girl, but the mesmeric subject, with every sense in a receptive condition for the mystic power that the repulsive little white-headed man exercised over her so easily and remorselessly.

Ralph was about to say something hot to the dwarf, but he thought that he had no right to cause Garnett fresh trouble by hasty speech just because he felt indignant himself, so he held his peace.

"You may stay, Garnett," was the curt permission given by Victor and the girl took a seat on the bed with the weary air of submission common to her when in the dwarf's presence.

"Now, Doctor Milton, you may as well have the box and then we can say good night and good luck to you on your mission."

"Very well," replied the doctor.

Ralph said nothing. He was standing by the chair on which Garnett had sat, with his eyes fixed on her in a dreamy reverie.

Victor went to the mantelpiece removed the cloth, and—started back in dismay.

"What's the matter?" shrieked Marcus and Jacques, though their blanched cheeks gave evidence that they recognized the nature of the trouble.

"The box is gone!" gasped Victor.

"Gone!" repeated Dr. Milton.

"Gone!" croaked the old woman.

"Yes, gone!" said Victor. "And yet I can swear I put it there half an hour ago!"

"Well, where can it be?" asked the doctor.

"Doesn't anybody know?"

"Yes, I can tell you!" suddenly broke in a voice from the door.

The three detectives who had searched Ralph's room advanced into the room and the spokesman held in his hand the ebony box.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

AT noon on the day after the events narrated in the last chapter Dr. Milton and Ralph were seated in a car at the depot, waiting until the locomotive, with a grating of wheels and puffing of steam, should start on its long journey toward the land of the rising sun.

Ralph's aunt and sister were standing on the depot platform talking to the wayfarers through the open window of the car.

"I don't suppose we shall be very long away, Pauline," Dr. Milton was saying. "It is a matter of urgent business that takes your brother and I away, or we should not leave you and your aunt alone. I don't like to do it, but there really is no help for it in this case."

"I wish you did not have to go just now, father," said Pauline, sadly, a tear-drop glistening in each eye.

"So do I, much," added Aunt Susan.

"Tush!" said Dr. Milton. "Why is my going away any worse now than at another time. You ought to be used to my absences now. They occur often enough. Besides, Pauline, you know that your father never forgets his little girl wherever he may be."

Pauline shook her head.

"Come, cheer up. Let me see you smile. That's right. That is like my brave little daughter."

"Father, dear, must you go?"

"Yes; there is no possibility of avoiding it."

"Why, Pauline, what's the matter? You are quite pale!" suddenly interposed Ralph.

"Oh, it's—it's nothing," returned Pauline, trembling. "A sudden faintness, that is all."

"Lord bless me, Pauline, what should make

you faint like that?" asked her aunt. "You don't often do anything so silly."

"Good-by, Pauline. Good-by, aunt," said Ralph, as the train pulled slowly out of the depot.

"Good-by, Pauline," from Dr. Milton.

"Good-by!"

"Good-by!"

"Father! Father!" suddenly called Pauline, as if in mortal terror.

But her father was out of hearing by this time, and Victor Renaire stood grinning and ducking his unnatural-looking white head at her side.

"How do you do Miss Pauline?" he said as he put out one of his claw-like hands.

Pauline shrank back in horror, but returned the bow with a slight inclination of the head, though she ignored the proffered hand.

Aunt Susan bowed stiffly.

It was easy to see that neither of the ladies cared very much for the dwarf.

"I came down with the intention of speaking to Dr. Milton before he started, but I came too late. However I don't regret my disappointment so much under the circumstances," he added with another bow and wink at Pauline, "since I have had the unexpected pleasure of meeting two ladies I esteem so highly."

Pauline and her aunt turned away with looks of ill-concealed disgust, and with a cool "Good-afternoon" were about to walk out of the depot.

This, however, did not suit the dwarf.

He hastened after them and walked by the side of Pauline.

"I shall have great pleasure in escorting you to your home," he said. "May I have that pleasure?"

"Mr. Renaire," returned Pauline, stopping suddenly and looking the dwarf full in the face. "Is it possible you do not see that your attentions are distasteful to me? I regret that you have forced me to speak so plainly, but you left me no alternative. Once more, I bid you good-evening."

And with an imperious gesture, she swept out of the depot with her aunt, leaving Victor Renaire standing still in astonishment at the boldness of the generally timid girl.

"So," he muttered. "You will defy me, eh? My attentions are distasteful, are they? Well, we will see. I think I can bend you to my will, if I set myself the task. And I will do so, for I have taken a fancy to you, Pauline Milton. I want a wife, and you are the lady I have chosen. I can afford to let you alone until Dr. Milton returns. Then, if I do not have my way, let both him and you beware!"

He strode out of the depot, high-heeled boots, plug hat and all, and people who saw him walking along with brows knit and preoccupied countenance thought he was revolving some business scheme in his head that would probably bring wealth to himself and credit to the community in which he lived. He never looked more like a respectable banker than at that moment.

It will perhaps be wondered how Doctor Milton and Ralph managed to depart on their mission with the ebony box after the encounter with the detectives on the previous evening.

This can be explained in a few words.

The three men who suddenly appeared at the door of the dwarf's room with the precious box in their possession had found means to secure it in a way that would have been impossible had not Victor Renaire been a little less watchful than usual.

While he was engaged with Ralph and Garnett he had placed the box on a chair near the door, from which it had been easily abstracted by one of the detectives standing in the gloom outside.

After the first moment of surprise at their sudden appearance Victor held out his hand and the box was given to him.

"I just wanted to warn you, that is all," said the foremost detective. "We have been sent to hunt that thing up, and—"

"You found it, eh?" interrupted Victor, with a knowing grin, in which his two brothers and mother joined him.

"Yes, we found it," was the response.

Then looks of deep meaning passed between the detectives and the dwarfs.

"What shall we say at headquarters?" asked the detective.

"Oh, the same old thing. That there is no such box in San Francisco and that you found nothing suspicious in this neighborhood."

"Good!"

"And you might say that we have a sick person here and don't like to be disturbed," added Victor, with another diabolical snicker.

"Very well. When shall we settle?" asked the detective.

"When I get back. I have to leave town tomorrow for a while."

"Well, I wish you good luck. But you had better be a little more careful with your valuable property hereafter. *Au revoir!*"

And the three detectives vanished as suddenly and quietly as they had appeared.

As will be easily seen, there was a good understanding between the Renaires and these

employees of the private detective bureau that had been engaged to hunt for the ebony box and its precious contents.

Dr. Milton seemed to understand the situation but Ralph had watched the proceedings with the greatest astonishment.

However, he had but little time to think about it, as, after making a few more preliminary arrangements for the journey he and his father had retired and left the dwarfs to pass the night in whatever way they saw fit.

How they started at noon the next day and how the dwarf had been there to watch them depart we already know.

When the latter had been so unequivocally snubbed by Pauline and her aunt he determined to see them again before the day had passed away.

So, after walking up and down outside the house of Dr. Milton for half an hour, in the hope of seeing Pauline at the door or one of the windows, he walked up the steps and rung the bell.

A moment after he was ushered into the parlor at the left side of the hall where Ralph had been playing the organ on the night he first met the Renaires.

Pauline was seated at the instrument, but turned around as he entered the room.

A quick flush passed over her fair features, and she arose from the organ stool.

"Be seated, Miss Milton," said Victor.

She obeyed mechanically.

"I have a few words to say to you, Miss Milton—Pauline—that I hope you will listen to quietly."

"Go on, sir."

"You may perhaps think that I, a man of business, have not much capacity for tender emotions."

"I have really never troubled myself to think about the capacities or feelings of a perfect stranger," was Pauline's cold reply.

"Stranger? Yes, that is true. Though your father and I are very old friends. Presuming somewhat on that fact, I have dared to hope that in time you might deign to look favorably on one who has for a long, long time admired you from a respectful distance."

"Sir, such words are an insult!"

"Perhaps. But to show you that I am in earnest, and that your father looks favorably upon my suit, I ask you to read this letter in your father's writing, and that he gave me to hand to you if you seemed to doubt his wishes in the matter. Here it is. Read."

Pauline took a sealed letter from his hand, though she evidently shrank from even such a slight communication with him. Tearing it open, she read as follows:

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. —, 188—

"DEAREST PAULINE:—Victor Renaire has told me he is desirous of paying honorable attentions to you with a view to making you his wife. I need not tell you that my chief desire is for your happiness. This I honestly believe could be secured by your acceptance of an offer of marriage from Victor Renaire. As he will doubtless tell you, he has long been a close friend of mine, and I have the greatest reliance upon his integrity. His habits are good, and though his stature is less than that of the ordinary run of men, I don't think his appearance is unpleasant to the average female eye. I should have said all this to you by word of mouth, but I had not the courage to speak words that would have a tendency to drive my dear little girl from my side. In justice to my friend Renaire, however, I felt that I must give you my feelings in regard to his proposal, and hence this letter. I trust to find everything settled when I return. Hoping you will weigh the advantages offered by Victor Renaire to his future wife, "I remain, ever your affectionate father,

HENRY MILTON."

P. S.—If you do not marry Victor Renaire, it means ruin and perhaps death to your father. H. M."

Pauline read the letter through with a deathly feeling of horror at her heart.

What could it mean?

Must she give up her fresh young life into the keeping of that little monster, with his unnatural white head and cruel glittering eyes?

And then that postscript to the letter!

There was the key to the eagerness her father felt for the alliance!

She looked over to where the dwarf was standing with his gaze fixed intently upon her. She could read in his face that he understood the struggle going on in her mind.

"Have you read this letter?" she asked at last.

"No."

"But you have a general knowledge of the nature of the contents, I presume?"

"Yes."

"You know that my father intimates that you threaten him with injury if I do not consent to your proposal, do you not?"

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders as he said: "Dr. Milton may have said some such thing. If he did I suppose he knew what he was talking about."

"What is the nature of the power you hold over him?" asked Pauline.

"You can hardly expect that I would expose all my secret weapons, even to a lady so fair and discreet as yourself," was the tantalizing reply.

"How long have you known my father?"

"For many years."

"A very indefinite reply. However, let it pass. How is it I have never seen you until this last few days. You have been living near here for some time."

"Yes, but I have been absent from the city at intervals, and my business with your father has been of such a nature that it would not be profitable to let all our transactions be known. Therefore, I have generally timed my visits here when I could see your father alone."

"Suppose I decline to consider this extraordinary proposal of yours at all, what then?"

"Have you carefully read your father's postscript?" returned the dwarf, significantly.

Pauline started.

"You can hardly expect me to give you an answer this evening. I must have time to reflect upon it."

"As long as you please, Pauline," said the dwarf. "I can wait."

The door of the room burst open and Marcus Renaire rushed in, wild with excitement.

"Ponoisi! Escaped! Garnett! Gone!" he panted.

"A thousand devils!" hissed Victor, as he dashed out of the house, followed by his brother.

CHAPTER XII.

DOWN THE SHAFT.

"DON'T worry yourselves, gentlemen," returned the detective to the remark of Sam Shaw. "We'll come down in less than two minutes."

It will be remembered that the Angel Camp boys had secured a decided advantage over the Pacific Detective and his companion, Colonel Blunt, when they were squeezing up through the shaft so that the detective and his friend had but little choice in the matter.

"The sooner you come the better I shall like it and the less danger there will be of some of these rifles going off," was Sam Shaw's reply, in a rather surly tone.

"All right!" called out Sleepless Eye. "You'll have to go down first, Blunt."

"I suppose so," replied the colonel, ruefully. "But I do hate to get trapped this way. Ain't there any way out of it, Sleepless Eye?"

"None, that I can see."

"What are you two chinning about up there?" broke in Sam Shaw, impatiently. "The two minutes time is half gone already, and by the great horn spoon there will be a shower of lead tickling you if you don't hurry."

"Can't you take those rifles away a minute?" asked the Colonel. "Some of you fellows have mighty shaky fingers and might touch off a trigger before you meant it."

"Come right down!"

"Yes, come right down," broke in a dozen other voices, whose owners were glaring, red-eyed and vengefully up the shaft in which the two fugitives were wedged.

"All right," answered the colonel. "Here we come."

He commenced to work himself downward.

"You have half a minute," announced Sam Shaw.

"Lots of time," replied the colonel.

He edged himself a little lower, and spread himself out so as to completely hide Sleepless Eye from the view of those below.

"Where's that infernal detective?" demanded Sam Shaw.

"Can't you see him?" asked the colonel.

"He's right on top of me."

"All right."

The rifles were taken away to give Blunt and Sleepless Eye room to get down.

"Another few inches will do it," remarked the colonel.

There was a scrape, a scuffle and Colonel Blunt tumbled to the floor in the midst of the group of desperadoes waiting to receive him.

But where was the man from the Pacific?

"Treachery!" yelled Sam Shaw, as he made a slash at Colonel Blunt with his bowie-knife.

Colonel Blunt leaped on one side, and wresting a rifle from the hands of one of the startled Angel Campers, swung it around with the desperation of despair.

Four of the men surrounding him went tumbling in a heap.

With a bound, Colonel Blunt reached the main room and dashed toward the door by which he had entered, and which led to liberty and life.

A dozen shots were fired as he reached the end of the room, but he had secured the cover of a huge upright, and the bullets whistled harmlessly around him.

He still had the rifle in his hand, but did not wish to shoot unless he was obliged.

Dashing through the heavy door, which had been left open, by some unaccountable accident, he slammed it shut, and as it fastened with a spring lock he laughed exultingly.

"Ha! ha! Sam Shaw! You'll have to get up early in the morning to get ahead of Sleepless Eye and Joe Blunt!"

He found himself in a small, square room, with a door facing him and a rude spiral staircase at his right hand.

The door led out to the ledge on which Sleepless Eye had fallen when thrown from the cliff,

and from which he had sounded the signal for his men to meet him. The spiral staircase had afforded them the means of obeying the signal.

By this staircase Blunt now made his way.

He was perfectly familiar with Angel Camp and his surroundings, though, as we have seen, Sleepless Eye had not been so well informed.

Some twenty steps brought him into another small room, from which there appeared to be no other mode of egress.

He stood still a moment and listened.

Some one was fumbling at the lock of the door below through which he had just passed.

"Ha! You shouldn't get drunk, Sam Shaw, when you have business on hand," he muttered. It is a bad plan. I guess you have brought more trouble upon yourself and Angel Camp through it this time than you will be able to straighten out in a month of Sundays."

The fumbling went on at the lock, and he could hear the sound of many voices raised in grumbling oaths.

"They will get to fighting among themselves, the first thing they know," thought the colonel. "However, I can not afford to stop and see the fun just now, though I guess I'll see them later.

He put his finger in a knot-hole in the boarded wall of the little room and a couple of planks came loose, so that he could pull them away, disclosing the solid rock.

"It is a good job I learned all the tricks of this place first," he said, "or I might have been stuck this time."

He put his shoulder against the rock and pushed.

The rock trembled.

Another push.

Could it be possible that he was moving that gigantic mass?

Yes, it was slowly but surely giving way.

A breath of fresh air made its way to the close chamber, and fanned the heated brow of the man who was laboring with superhuman strength to reach the outer world.

Another mighty effort.

The rock moved away and left an opening large enough for a man to pass through.

Colonel Blunt was on the mountain where we just introduced Bill Watkins to the reader, and within a few yards of the spot where Sleepless Eye was pushed over the cliff.

"Ah!" said Colonel Blunt, as he drew a long breath. "That tastes good, after being underground so long."

He turned around to the rock he had displaced and pushed it back to the niche made to receive it.

When he had done so none could have told that it had ever been removed since it had been deposited in its present position by the hand of nature.

"Hallo, colonel!" a voice called:

"Sleepless Eye!"

"That's what!"

"Give us your hand!"

Sleepless Eye had stepped out from behind a clump of trees, and the two shook hands heartily.

"We had better get out of this," suggested the detective.

"That's so," returned Blunt. "Some of those fellows will be up here soon, and I have nothing but this rifle, with not a single charge besides what is in it. Are you fixed at all?"

"How can I be fixed? You know how I was when I got out. I haven't got as much as a toothpick."

"Never mind. We'll soon get some weapons once we get away from here. Let's get."

The two strode away in the early morning, and were speedily lost to view, as they took their path down through the clump of whispering pines before referred to, and made their way to the plains below the mountain.

Hardly had they vanished when the stone that hid one entrance to Angel Camp was pushed on one side much quicker than when Colonel Blunt had applied his shoulder to it alone.

The bloated countenance of Sam Shaw appeared first, and he was speedily followed by the rest of the half-drunken rabble that made up the membership of Angel Camp.

"Where did they go?" exclaimed Sam. "By the Lord, I'll cut their hearts out if I get my hands on them."

"Oh, simmer down!" retorted Bill Watkins. "They are far enough away by this time. The best thing we can do is to hunt up some safe place to stay for a day or two. They will be back before long, you can bet, and Angel Camp will get such a cleaning out as it never had before. Black Bart was right. He warned us to look out and he knew perfectly well what he was talking about. He ain't no fool if he is a poet."

"Well, but what about the plunder down there? Are we to leave all that behind us for the officers to scoop in?"

"Not by a darned sight," returned Bill. "We can soon put the stuff out of sight. Sleepless Eye and his gang don't know every little nook and corner of Angel Camp."

As he spoke with an exultant ring in his voice he was joined in the chuckle with which it was accompanied by the two dozen desperadoes clustered around him.

They were about as tough looking a set of men

as could be scared up even in California in its wildest days.

Though their appearance was generally that of miners, there was a sinister expression in the countenance of most of them that seemed to extend even to their clothes, giving them a hang-dog look that savored of the jail as much as of the camp.

They laughed at the intimation of Bill Watkins that the authorities could still be circumvented to a certain extent, and there was a general move toward the entrance of the subterranean camp to carry out the ideas of the speaker.

"Hold on, boys. Three men are enough to attend to that matter, and the rest had better make tracks for a safer quarter."

"Well, who are the three, Bill?"

"Yes, you appoint the committee, Bill!" added another.

"Much obliged for the honor you confer on me, boys. I should say that Sam Shaw, Ed. Ralston and myself could manage the business and make everything snug. What do you say, boys?"

"Yes," was the reply, in chorus. "That's good enough."

"All right. Is everybody fixed?"

"I am," said one. "I have a six-shooter, bowie and Winchester. That is enough for me."

"Same here!" from another.

"And here!"

"And here!"

"Well, then, we'll put the others out of sight. Come along, Sam. Now, Ed."

The three men went into the camp again, while the others removed toward the clump of trees among which Sleepless Eye and Blunt had disappeared, and soon there was not a sign of human life to be seen. The place was as deserted as if the green sward had never been pressed by the foot of man. A deep silence reigned—a silence such as is only possible when Nature, casting off the slothfulness of night, induces herself with the rosily-tinted mantle thrown over her by the god of day!

The sun was rising high in the eastern sky and a golden glow tinged tree-tops, rocks and canyons.

The scene was a beautiful one, and everything spoke of peace and quietude.

Hallo! What is this, slowly crawling up the slope over the same path traversed by Sleepless Eye and Black Bart the day before?

A man, surely!

Yes, a man, and one with whom the reader has already formed some acquaintance.

It was Jacques Renaire!

But what was he doing here?

That was a secret of his own, and he was just the man to guard it closely.

Up the slope he came and was walking straight over to the tree through which Bill Watkins, Sam Shaw and Black Bart had gained the camp.

Apparently Jacques was acquainted with the secret means of effecting ingress, as he disappeared in the hollow trunk.

And now occurred a strange thing!

The tree sunk into the ground, until the top of its gnarled branches were level with the surface.

It made a difference in the appearance of the place, and it was easy to understand that the object was to throw anybody off the scent who was seeking Angel Camp.

A few moments later Jacques Renaire, Bill Watkins, Sam Shaw and Sol Ralston appeared at the other exit, which they carefully closed, and arranged so that no one could find it who was not very familiar with the spot.

"I think we have fooled them this time," said Bill Watkins.

"Well, I don't know," retorted Sam Shaw. "I don't believe we'll ever fool that Sleepless Eye until we put half a dozen bullets into him. They will have to be mightily well delivered, too, to have any effect."

"I guess you are right," said Jacques. "He is a slippery cuss. By the way, boys, what do you think of my rig? You've never seen me in a plug hat and a black suit before, I guess. I tell you we do it in fine shape up in Frisco. We are all three dressed alike, and we just pass among the bon ton."

His three companions laughed and were about to make some jesting reply, when Jacques, who had been looking in the direction of the trees already referred to several times, suddenly stood still, and pointing to them, seemed almost paralyzed with surprise and dismay.

"Look—boys!" he stammered in trembling tones.

The others followed the direction of his finger, and the sight presented to them seemed to freeze them with horror.

CHAPTER XIII

A DOUBLE DISAPPEARANCE.

WHEN Victor Renaire dashed away from the house of Dr. Milton with his brother Marcus he was nearly frenzied with rage and fear.

Yes, fear!

That unscrupulous man, whom we have seen bear his part against people so much larger and stronger than himself physically seemed nearly beside himself when he heard that the weak wo-

man and timid girl had released themselves from his talons.

"How did they get away, Marcus?" he asked, as they ran up the stairs to their apartments.

"How can I tell? I have not been home all day."

The old woman, their mother, was found in the large front room, rocking herself back and forth in her chair in front of the fire-place.

The bed had been pulled out of its usual place against the wall, and the secret panel that generally hid the entrance to Madame Ponoisi's little room was pushed on one side, showing that the chamber beyond was unoccupied.

Everything was in disorder.

"Where is she, mother?" demanded Victor, fiercely, as he burst into the room.

"Who?" asked the hag, without looking up.

"Ponoisi—Garnett. Both of them. You know who I mean," retorted Victor.

"Ponoisi! Ah, yes; ah, yes! She's gone; she's gone! And Garnett, too—Garnett, too. Yes, yes. Both gone; both gone!" said the old woman.

"When did they go?" asked Victor, trying to control his temper.

"Hours ago; hours ago. Both together; both together! Garnett and Ponoisi; Garnett and Ponoisi. Yes; yes. I was beautiful once; beautiful once," croaked the old woman.

"It is no use, Marcus. This seems to be one of her worst days," said Victor. "We can't get anything out of her. I expect the whole business was arranged between Garnett and Ponoisi. They knew—or, at least, Garnett knew—that the old lady would be by herself all day, and it was easy to get Ponoisi out. The question is, where can they be now. They had no money, so they can't be far away. Curse them! We should have had Ponoisi out of the city to-day, if we had not changed our minds at the last moment."

"Bad thing to change your mind," put in Marcus, sententiously.

"Here's a letter—a letter!" interposed the old woman, who had appeared to be in a doze.

"Where?" cried Victor.

"A letter—letter;" repeated the hag, with provoking calmness, without changing her position, or ceasing her rocking to and fro.

"Well, where is it?"

"A letter!"

Victor rushed up to his respected parent and shook her by the shoulder.

"Where is the letter?" he shrieked.

"On the table—the table!"

Victor fumbled around on the table, and finally came across a scrap of dirty, yellow paper tucked under a corner of the table-cloth.

"What is it?" asked Marcus curiously.

"It is written in cipher. Let's see? It says: 'The two you seek are on the train that left the depot at noon. This is reliable.'"

"Fooled, by heavens!" ejaculated Marcus.

"Sure as you're alive!" added Victor.

It was even as the note declared.

Mme. Ponoisi and Garnett were seated in a car immediately in the rear of that in which Dr. Milton and Ralph were riding.

Neither couple knew of the presence of the other on the train.

Mme. Ponoisi was pale, and lay back in the seat as if tired out.

"We shall soon get to Pinewood," Garnett was saying, "and then we shall be safe. It seems hardly possible that I have not been there since I was a helpless little child. I seem to know the place quite well, and I feel sure that I can find my way to the house that was my home without assistance."

"How long have you been with the Renaires in San Francisco?" asked Mme. Ponoisi.

"Oh, a long, long time. I remember Victor Renaire speaking to me as I stood at the door one day, and the next thing I knew I was on the train, with all three of them sitting around me. Since that time," continued the girl with a shiver, "Victor Renaire has held me completely in his power, and I don't even know my true name. I fear even now that he may get me in his clutches before we can reach Pinewood."

"Don't be nervous, my dear. Look at me. Consider how long I have been a prisoner there, treated like a lunatic. Yet I feel now that I have breathed the air of freedom, as if I could defy the whole tribe of Renaires, single-handed. They thought I had no money, but that was where they missed their calculations. I had a sum that I always kept ready for the opportunity that has at last arrived."

The train rattled on, through canyons, over level stretches and through the virgin forest, screeching, puffing, bounding along, every mile increasing the distance between Victor Renaire and the two women who were seeking safety far away from San Francisco.

Never had California scenery seemed so beautiful as it did on this day to Mme. Ponoisi and Garnett.

The shades of evening were falling softly when the brakeman sung out "Pinewood."

"Here we are," said Garnett.

"At last," said Madame Ponoisi.

The two women alighted and stood for a moment on the platform.

Just as the train was about to start again

Madame Ponoisi caught sight of a face at the window of the car in which Ralph and Doctor Milton were seated.

"My son," exclaimed she, as she made a step forward toward the train.

The next minute Ralph Milton sprung from the train and rushed into her arms.

"Mother!"

"Ralph!"

"And Garnett, too," said Ralph. "Why, what you doing here? But I don't care, mother, so long as I have found you. That vile Victor Renaire! I was always sure that he had you concealed somewhere on his mysterious premises, but I never could tell where."

"Ah, my son, when I heard your voice in that room it seemed as if I must tear down the very walls to reach you."

"Were you within sound of my voice, then?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not make your presence known?"

"Alas! How could I? I was completely in the power of that wretch, Victor Renaire."

By this time the train was fast disappearing in the distance and Ralph remembered for the first time that his father had gone on with it.

"Never mind," he said, "he will get along just as well without me. Where do you intend to go, mother, and why have you come to this out-of-the-way place?"

"Chiefly to get away from Victor Renaire until I can recover my strength. Then, let him tremble. I have such knowledge of his doings as will put him behind prison bars for the remainder of his life."

"And you, Garnett?" said Ralph.

Before she could reply a man, who looked like he was a prosperous farmer, stepped up to the group and in a respectful manner asked Ralph if they were strangers in Pinewood.

"We want to find the residence of Mr. Strood," said Garnett. "Can you direct us?"

"I am going that way, and will show you if you like."

The offer was accepted and the four walked out of the depot, Ralph and his mother following Garnett and the stranger.

There was no lack of conversation. Madame Ponoisi and Ralph had much to say to each other, and Garnett was answering a number of questions put to her by the stranger, as to when she was in Pinewood before and what she had been doing in San Francisco. The latter seemed to interest him particularly.

Gradually he learned her whole history, as far as she could give it.

Garnett fancied once or twice his interest in her was rather strong for a stranger, but put it down to the natural inquisitiveness of a man in a small country place.

At last he stopped in front of a comfortable-looking house standing back from the road in its own garden.

"Here we are," exclaimed Garnett, bounding through the gate. "I remember the dear old place again, in spite of the years that have sped since I saw it last."

The others followed her, the stranger walking in behind Madame Ponoisi and Ralph.

"I don't see any light. I wonder if there is anybody at home."

"I don't think there is," interposed the stranger. "In fact, I may say I am sure there is not. But I can soon let you in."

He drew a large key from his pocket and stepped up to the door.

"Why," said Garnett, flushing, as a new light seemed to break in upon her. "Surely, you—you—must be Mr. Strood."

"Know me at last, eh, Garnett?" responded the stranger as he drew the girl toward him and kissed her again and again. "I hoped, and yet feared you would not recognize me. Yes, I am indeed Mr. Strood, and how glad I am to get my little girl back no one can tell."

Garnett was laughing and crying by turns, while Madame Ponoisi and Ralph were completely overcome at the unexpected turn of affairs.

"You'll take care of us, Uncle Strood, won't you? I mean of Madame Ponoisi as well as your little girl. If Victor Renaire—"

"Victor Renaire!" broke in Mr. Strood, as his brow clouded with passion. "Victor Renaire had better beware ere he again interferes with *Sleepless Eye the Detective*."

Yes, this quiet man, with the appearance of a farmer, was none other than the famous detective whom we have seen was the possessor of such marvelous knowledge of the ways of men. In Pinewood, where he lived, he was known only as a quiet, neighborly man, who was tolerably well supplied with this world's goods and who always minded his own business. No one there suspected that he was the eminent detective whose name was familiar from one end of California to the other.

"I have an old score to settle with the Renaires," he went on, "and the day of settlement is fast drawing near. But enough of this. Come in. You are all heartily welcome."

He led them into the roomy parlor, and soon placed refreshments before them.

"The house has always been left by itself, when I have been out since I lost my little girl ten

years ago," said Mr. Strood, or Sleepless Eye, as we will still call him. "I had a housekeeper in those days, but since then I have not needed one."

There was not a happier party in the whole State of California than those four people as they sat around the fireplace and talked over the adventures of Garnett and Mme. Ponoisi and the brighter prospects ahead.

Ralph had told what he knew of his home, but thought it wise to say nothing of his connection with the Renaires, for his father's sake. He felt some prickings of conscience at having deserted his father on the train, but he knew the indulgent nature of his parent too well to anticipate anything more than a gentle reprimand.

He accepted Sleepless Eye's invitation to stay all night and determined to take the first train back to San Francisco in the morning.

When Garnett and Mme. Ponoisi had retired for the night Sleepless Eye and Ralph stood in the fresh evening air at the door enjoying a quiet cigar from Sleepless Eye's private box.

Each was wrapped in his own thoughts.

Ralph's were of the mother he had so happily regained, mingled with hopes that he might at some time feel justified in telling Garnett something that had been on his mind since he had first seen her in Renaire's room. He wondered if his father would feel as much surprise and joy at finding his mother as he experienced. Sometimes a horrible doubt flashed across his mind as to whether his father knew anything about her incarceration, but he dismissed it as unworthy both of himself and his parent.

And of what was Sleepless Eye thinking?

It would be hard to say, such a swift and varied panorama of past scenes in which he had taken an active part was whirling through his mind. He thought of his adventure with Black Bart; of his narrow escape from the desperadoes of Angel Camp, and again of some past experience with Victor Renaire, that he was determined should be the prelude of a desperate reckoning with that diminutive gentleman in the near future.

Through all his meditations ran the happy feeling of relief from what had long been the cloud of his life. His dear daughter was again under his roof-tree and protection—dropped from the skies, as it were, to bring peace and happiness to his heart.

He felt that he had earned the hour's comfort he was enjoying, though he knew there was earnest work before him on the morrow.

"Beautiful evening," said Ralph, at last, flicking the ashes off the end of his cigar.

"Very," was Sleepless Eye's sententious reply, as he looked up at the fleecy clouds that seemed to be merely flirting in the soft light of the moon, without obscuring its rays.

Suddenly, a loud, startled cry from the room above. Garnett's voice.

Sleepless Eye rushed into the house, to meet Garnett at the foot of the stairs, in her white night-robe, wild-eyed and frightened.

"What is the matter?"

"She's gone—gone," replied Garnett. "I had been asleep. A minute ago I awoke, and her place by my side was empty and—cold."

The next instant Sleepless Eye and Ralph had dashed out of the house toward the forest-clad mountain at the back.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORTAL OR SPECTER.

Not much wonder that Jacques Renaire and his companions were frightened!

What they saw in the shadow of the trees was well calculated to make men with the knowledge of guilt in their hearts feel a tremor.

Jacques, especially, was affected by the apparition more than he would have confessed afterward.

Standing in their path, with rigid, white-clad form, ashy-pale face and dark eyes, with an unnatural, set stare in their glassy depths, was a woman. Unearthly as her appearance was, and unexpectedly as she had burst upon their vision, the four men recognized her at once.

It was Mme. Ponoisi!

But what meant that meaningless stare?

Why did she stand there like a living creature suddenly turned to stone?

Why was she in that white robe, with her dark tresses falling in a loose and disordered mantle over her neck and shoulders?

Was she indeed a lunatic, as the Renaires had declared?

And how did she get here, so many, many miles from San Francisco?

Jacques could almost believe that he was mad himself, or that Mme. Ponoisi had a double.

The four men stood still, waiting to see what she would do.

Slowly she advanced toward them, but looking straight ahead, as if she saw them not.

"Pshaw!" said Jacques, "she is but a woman."

He made a rush toward her, and was about to clutch her arm, when something rattled against the side of his head, and he fell over senseless, as if he had been struck by a thunderbolt.

At the same moment two men placed them-

selves in front of the woman, and four pistols were leveled at the three desperadoes who were with Jacques Renaire.

"Sleepless Eye, by all that's unlucky!" exclaimed Bill Watkins.

"Sleepless Eye it is," responded that gentleman, "so throw up your hands!"

His order was sullenly obeyed and he stepped forward to disarm them, when, with a loud shriek, Mme. Ponoisi fell at full length on the rough ground between the contending parties.

Instantly Ralph dropped his pistols and stooped down to her assistance.

"Mother! Mother!" he said. "What is the matter? Why did you leave your bed to wander through the forest in this manner?"

"Oh, my son, I know not. I was asleep, and here I find myself—oh, it is too terrible! Where am I? Who are those men? See, they are going to shoot."

Crack, crack, went a couple of pistols and Bill Watkins's earthly career was over. He and Sleepless Eye had fired together, and the latter had a bullet-hole through the rim of his hat.

"Pretty close shave!" he remarked, coolly. "But it won't be healthy for either of you fellows if you drop your hands before I give you permission."

Sam Shaw and Edward Ralston evidently appreciated this fact and kept their hands well up in the air.

Meanwhile Ralph was assisting his mother to rise, with the intention of leading her toward the clump of trees mentioned so frequently before.

"Come here, Ralph," said Sleepless Eye.

"Wait a minute, mother. Just step back a little further," said Ralph. "I had forgotten all about these scoundrels."

"Now, Ralph," repeated Sleepless Eye, impatiently.

"All right. I am here."

Whizz—bang! Jacques Renaire had taken aim at Sleepless Eye as he lay on the ground. But he missed his aim.

Ralph sprung upon him and seized his throat.

"You villain! What are you doing here?" hissed Ralph. "I could choke you to death!"

But the dwarf shook him off as easily as if he had been a little child.

"Don't be a fool. You are in bad company, and the sooner you find it out the better it will be for you," said the dwarf in a low tone.

"Scoundrel!" was Ralph's only reply.

Suddenly a peculiar whistle was heard among the trees.

Renaire put his fingers in his mouth and answered it with a similar sound.

Again the whistle cleaved the air, but much nearer, and Black Bart bounded into the open space.

Sleepless Eye turned swiftly to face the near foe and Ralston and Sam Shaw were upon him.

A second sufficed for the snatching away of his pistol and he was a helpless prisoner.

"Take him to camp," said Black Bart. "I guess that is a safe place as long as we have him in our power."

"How about Blunt?" put in Sam Shaw.

"Maybe he will give the thing away."

"I have fixed him all right," returned Black Bart, with quiet significance.

Sleepless Eye was accordingly led away and soon disappeared into Angel Camp by the entrance that was concealed by the rock, as already described.

Then Black Bart walked over to Jacques Renaire, who at the first appearance of the robber had forced Ralph down so that his face could not be seen.

"Well, Jacques, what are you doing in this part of the country, and what is all this ruction about?"

"Oh! Sleepless Eye undertook to run the whole business, and we objected, that's all."

"What's that you're holding down? Is it alive?"

"Yes; it's a young fellow who was going to chew me up. I'll show him to you after a while. Poor Bill Watkins has been wiped out, though," added the dwarf, glancing over at the stiffening body of the man who had fallen before Sleepless Eye's pistol.

The killing of a man was not a sufficiently unusual occurrence to cause much comment. Moreover, Bill Watkins had never been a very particular friend of Black Bart's.

"We'll put him under the ground before the sun gets too high," was all he said.

"Do you want to see this fellow?" asked Jacques.

"No, I don't care," was the indifferent reply, as Black Bart strolled away.

"Stay!"

The voice of a woman! The voice of Madame Ponoisi!

Black Bart started, and looked in a bewildered manner at the white-robed figure before him.

"How did you come here?" he muttered.

"Jacques, is this the way you have fulfilled your contract?"

"Ask Victor," was Jacques's sullen retort.

"Yes, ask Victor," added Madame Ponoisi, sarcastically, "and perhaps he can tell you."

"Woman, will you always be my evil genius?"

asked Black Bart, as he seized her by the shoulder.

"It depends upon you."

"Upon me?"

"Yes. Restore me to my position as head of your household, and all will be well. But it must be far away from San Francisco. Oh! you thought I could not penetrate your disguise. You thought I did not know that Black Bart, the stage-robber, is known in San Francisco as—"

"Hush!" said Black Bart, placing his hand over her mouth. "Do not breathe that name here!"

"Well, I won't. But, you see I know you."

"This is neither the time nor the place for the settlement of our affairs."

"Where am I to go?"

"You must have some place near here. You can't be wandering around in the woods all the time."

"When and where am I to see you again?"

"When you please."

"To-morrow, then, at the Pinewood railroad depot, at noon."

"I will be there."

Jacques Renaire sprung to his feet and rushed towards Mme. Ponoisi.

But she was gone.

"Confound her," muttered the disappointed dwarf. "What made you let her go?"

"We shall see her to-morrow."

"Perhaps."

Meanwhile, Ralph, on being released by Jacques Renaire, was slowly rising to his feet.

He saw Jacques and a strange man in conversation, for it must be remembered that the heavily bearded Black Bart had never been seen by him before. He thought a moment, and then, wisely concluding that the odds were against him, resolved to make the best of his way to Pinewood: where he could procure assistance in rescuing his new friend, Mr. Strood, or Sleepless Eye.

He walked around in a circle and managed to reach the clump of trees unseen by Sleepless Eye and Jacques Renaire. Then he made up his mind that the sooner he got away from that neighborhood the better it would be for his head so he started on the dead run for Pinewood.

But where was his mother?

Ralph felt sure that she would also be on her way to the village and expected to catch her before he reached there.

He was right in his expectation. Soon he caught a glimpse of a white dress among the trees before him and in another minute he held Mme. Ponoisi in his embrace.

"My son! I was almost wild with anxiety about you."

"It is all right, mother. Try and not be excited, though indeed our adventures are enough to agitate the strongest brain."

"I am thinking of Garnett, too," said Mme. Ponoisi. "The poor child must be all alone in the house. I don't remember leaving her, but I know that I must have got up in a somnambulistic state and found my way to the spot where I met those terrible men. For two years past, since my troubles began, I have been in the habit of walking in my sleep."

"Mother," said Ralph, after a pause, during which he was apparently lost in reflection. "Who is Garnett? What is her name? Do you know?"

"Yes, my son."

"Will you not tell me?"

"Not now. At some future time."

"But, mother, I am interested in her—more perhaps than you think."

"Ah, Ralph, you don't know your mother, or you would never suppose that I can't see how much you are interested in that young girl. But there are grave reasons why I should not say anything about her at present. You can trust your mother, can you not?"

A silent pressure of the hand gave her assurance that Ralph was willing to leave everything to her judgment.

At last they reached the town. It was a quiet little place, and as Sleepless Eye's residence was on the outskirts, they reached it without meeting more than two or three persons, who glanced rather curiously at the couple, but allowed them to pass on without remark.

They reached the gate and walked along the path to the front door.

Lights shone from the window with a sickly yellow glare in the early daylight, and the door stood open.

Mme. Ponoisi quickened her pace and ran into the house. Everything was quiet. She went up stairs to the bedroom in which she and Garnett had retired the night before.

Empty!

Down-stairs she came, only to meet Ralph standing in the hall.

"Where is Garnett, mother?"

"I can't find her. Did you look in the lower rooms?"

"Yes, but she is not in any of them."

"Strange. Let us go up-stairs again. I noticed a small bedroom over the hall. She may be there."

"Very well, mother. I'll go up. You stay here. You must be tired out."

"No; I will go, too. I am too anxious to remain quietly anywhere until we find her."

"Listen!" said Ralph, standing still and holding up a warning forefinger. "I believe I heard her voice."

"So do I."

"It is in that hall bedroom. But who can she be talking to. I will soon find out."

The young man dashed up the stairs and turned the handle of the hall bedroom door.

It was locked!

"Garnett! Garnett!" he cried.

No answer.

"Garnett! It is I—Ralph Milton. Don't be afraid. Open the door."

He listened intently for a reply. Then he heard a smothered sound, as of a person trying to speak with something over her mouth.

"Garnett!" he repeated, shaking the door.

This time he was confident that he could distinguish Garnett's voice trying to frame the words 'Save me!'

Nearly maddened with apprehensions of a mysterious peril to this young girl for whom he had conceived a regard that was stronger than friendship, but of which as yet he hardly knew the nature, Ralph placed his knee against the door and with all his force strove to burst it in. He made the casing and panels crack, but the stubborn barrier held its place.

Another push!

It yields.

One more, and down went the door with a loud noise and a cloud of dust from the plaster above.

For a moment Ralph was blinded. Then the dust cleared partly away and his eyes met—the baleful gaze of Victor Renaire.

"Where is Garnett, villain?" shouted Ralph.

Victor grinned triumphantly, and, pointing to an inanimate figure lying at full length on the floor, hissed:

"There!"

CHAPTER XV.

STRATEGY VERSUS BRUTE STRENGTH.

SLEEPLESS EYE was very unceremoniously hustled into the small dark room in which he and Colonel Blunt had been confined before.

"There!" said Sam Shaw, "this is the second time you have occupied this room in our hotel, but I guess I'll keep a close watch on you this time. No climbing up the shaft any more, if I know it. I'll dress you in a pair of bracelets to make sure of you."

In a twinkling he had placed a pair of steel handcuffs on Sleepless Eye's wrists and drawn them up so tightly that they almost cut the flesh.

"How do they fit?"

"Well, they fit rather too much for comfort."

"But not too much for safety."

"You might loosen them a little though," said Sleepless Eye, "and still have me safely. There is no sense in squeezing me to death."

"Loosen them yourself, if you can," was Sam Shaw's sneering reply, as he shut the door with a dash and left Sleepless Eye in the dark to his reflections.

As may be supposed the detective's thoughts were not of the pleasantest nature.

With the knowledge that his house and adopted daughter were both unprotected, his late prisoner, Black Bart, almost within his grasp, and then at liberty, and himself caught like a rat in a trap, it was no wonder if he felt that Dame Fortune had played him some exceptionally mean trick.

Where was his henchman, Colonel Blunt?

He had made an appointment to meet him at his house in Pinewood this morning to perfect plans for raiding Angel Camp and for trying to get his hands once more on Black Bart.

Now Blunt would be at the house and no one could give him any idea of where he was.

If Garnett should see him she would not be able to direct him toward Angel Camp, because he had no idea himself when he started out where he was going.

Whichever way he looked he could not see much hope.

"Those blackguards will wipe me out now, they have me in this den as sure as shooting," he thought, "and no one will be any the wiser. Well, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have done my duty. And yet—and yet—I should like to have found my child, my poor little Nelly, before I passed in my checks. I always suspected that white-headed villain, Victor Renaire, of taking her away, and since I know that he stole my little Garnett I feel sure of it.

When that old Chinaman gave me Garnett to take care of out there in Calaveras county, I felt almost as if I had got my own little one back. Nelly would have been just about her age. And then, to think that that infernal Victor couldn't even let her stay with me! By heavens! If I only could get out of this and meet him once more!"

Sleepless Eye raised his manacled hands in his agony of spirit and let them fall against the door with a rattle.

Instantly the door swung, and Sam Shaw growled:

"Stop that darned noise in there. What d'y

mean slamming those handcuffs around that way. I guess I'll have to tighten 'em up a little more."

"It was an accident!" said Sleepless Eye, quietly.

"Well, don't let the accident occur again, or it will be bad for yer," was Sam Shaw's gruff retort, as he shut the door once more. A moment later he returned and tied Sleepless Eye's elbows tightly to his side. Then he walked out and banged the door shut without another word.

Sleepless Eye stood for a few minutes thinking over his situation.

He was not the man to quietly succumb, and now that he had got over his first burst of despondency the thought of escape was uppermost in his mind.

He had got out of this same place before and why not again?

He glanced upward and saw that he was standing immediately under the narrow shaft that was open to the sky, and through which he had once before made his way to the outer world. He looked longingly up at the fleecy white clouds that were speeding across the blue sky like fairy birds in a frolic. If he could only feel the balmy breezes of the mountain air once more on his cheek! It seemed to him as if he had been confined in this earthly smelling den for an age instead of a short half-hour!

Ah! What was that?

Voices in the large outer room! Some of the gang had returned to their hole now that the hunter was safely behind this strong door!

They had found out that he was a prisoner, and concluded that it was safe to take possession of Angel Camp again!

"I've got him, boys," he heard Sam Shaw say. "Got him safe, with his hands in steel-bound trimmings. Darn my blood, if I couldn't eat his heart, the skunk!"

"I admire his taste," said Sleepless Eye, to himself.

"Open up the door and let us look at him," said one of the gang.

"Oh, no; let him alone for the present. We will take him out and stretch his neck as soon as Black Bart comes in. Then there will be plenty of fun," replied Sam Shaw.

"Ed, where's the cold tea?"

"Here it is—lots of it."

There was the sound of liquor gurgling out of demijohns into tin cups and Sleepless Eye charitably hoped the whole crowd would speedily get drunk.

"Though, curse them!" he reflected, "they don't seem to lose their wits when they are drunk, like decent men."

He listened to the sound of revelry and felt assured that they would not disturb him again very soon.

He gathered from what Sam Shaw had let fall that Black Bart was not in the camp. Where he was he could not imagine. He had seen him outside just before he was brought down and expected that the robber would have joined Sam Shaw and his companions immediately.

Jacques Renaire, too. Where was he? He had no doubt but that the dwarf was a member of this mysterious brotherhood that used his name for one of their pass-words.

While thinking thus Sleepless Eye had been gently feeling his way around his cell to determine whether anything had been left there that would enable him to solve the problem of an escape.

No; the room was quite empty save for his own presence.

Suddenly a thought struck him and it seemed as if the black darkness of his prison was dispelled by a heaven-born ray of light.

Hope was in his breast.

Carefully he groped his way to the wall opposite the door and supported himself against the rocky side of his prison.

Then he crossed one leg over the other and pressed the calf of his left leg against his right thigh.

"Is it there?" he muttered, anxiously. "I don't remember taking it out of my pocket."

Again he pressed his leg against his thigh.

What was he doing?

Sam Shaw had fastened his arms so that he could not reach the pockets of his pantaloons with his hands. He wanted to find a little article that should be in his right-hand pocket and upon which he felt that his eventual escape largely depended.

He kept up his maneuvers, and then—he could hardly repress a shout of triumph!

It was there!

But what was the article?

Only a small key. That was all.

But that small key was made to unlock a pair of handcuffs, and he hoped it would release his hands from the cruel steel bands that held him in such a painful and merciless grasp.

But it may be asked, what good was the key in his pocket where he could not reach it? And even if he got it in his fingers, how could he unlock the handcuffs, triced up as he was?

He thought of all that, and thoroughly realized that he had a difficult task before him.

But the hope of escaping from a prison, guarded by merciless jailers thirsting for his

blood, sharpened Sleepless Eye's naturally keen wits.

He felt confident he would hit upon some plan of using the key for his release.

Having made sure that the little key was in his pocket, he determined not to lose any more precious time.

In his eventful life he had learned to do many things, and had had numberless strange experiences. Among them he counted a season with a circus. He had been a clown, and in addition to bandying jokes with the ring-master and holding banners and hoops for the ladies to jump over and through, had turned flip-flaps and performed various other agile feats that come under the head of "ground-tumbling."

His ability in this direction stood him in good stead in his present situation.

Stooping down, he bent forward until he could rest his manacled hands upon the floor. Then, with a dexterous movement, he kicked up his heels and was standing upon his head.

He shook himself while in this position a second or two, and was rewarded for his exertions by hearing something fall with a tinkling sound upon the floor.

It was the key. He had shaken it out of his pocket.

He speedily put himself right side up, and then, going down on his hands and knees, crawled around until he found the precious key.

His hands were securely fastened, but he managed to transfer the key to his mouth, where he held it firmly between his strong front teeth.

The rest was easy.

He got his wrists up to his mouth, and one by one unlocked the handcuffs. Then a quick wrench and twist released him from the cord that Sam Shaw had so obligingly fastened around his elbows.

Sleepless Eye drew a deep breath of relief as he found himself with arms and hands free once more.

He listened intently to assure himself that he had not made noise enough to be heard in the large room where the Angel Campers were enjoying each other's sweet society.

No; they were evidently occupied with cards, as he could hear them talking about "straight flushes," "jack pots," "seeing your hands," and other incidentals to the national game of draw poker.

"I guess they will let me alone for a while, at all events," muttered Sleepless Eye; "and that is all I want."

He felt all over the door. It was solid as the rest of the wood.

"Pshaw!" said he, "what would be the use of opening it even if I could. It would only put me right in the middle of them, and they are just drunk enough to be ugly. They would commence firing into me without stopping to think."

He moved away from the door and looked up the shaft toward the open air once more.

If he could only reach the bottom of the opening!

But there were no sticks of wood for him to throw up this time, and he felt that his means of escape did not lay that way.

No, strategy was his only hope.

Another minute and his plan was matured.

He held the handcuffs firmly in his right hand. Then he knocked softly at the door.

No result!

He knocked again. This time the bar was swiftly removed from the outside, the bolt shot back, and Sam Shaw's shaggy head, with its old slouch hat poked inside.

Sleepless Eye had got behind the door, which opened inward.

"Where are you, you miserable skunk?" asked Sam Shaw, savagely. "By heavens, I don't believe I'll be able to wait until Black Bart comes before I slice your throat. Where are you, I say."

It is needless to say that Sleepless Eye did not reply, and Sam Shaw burst into the room, determined to punish the contemptuous silence of his prisoner.

As he approached the corner where Sleepless Eye was in hiding, something flashed before his bleared vision, and he sunk down in a heap under a crushing blow on the head.

"I guess these handcuffs hurt a man when they catch him right," muttered Sleepless Eye, as he stood over Sam Shaw's senseless carcass. "I meant to give him a good one, and—I did."

As he spoke he picked up the old slouch hat that had fallen from Sam's head, and put it on. Then he took the two pistols from the desperado's belt, and picked up his knife from the floor. He took one more look at his fallen foe, and saw that, though he was not dead, he was too badly hurt to make any trouble for awhile. Pulling the hat well down over his eyes, he marched boldly out and shut and bolted the door.

The group around the table, partly stupefied by whisky, did not take the trouble to look up.

Ed Ralston said, carelessly:

"How is he, Sam? Does he look all right?"

Sleepless Eye gave a short grunt of acquiescence, and turned his back on the card-players.

He waited a minute until they had settled down again to their game. Then he sauntered slowly toward the door at the end of the long room, through which he hoped to reach freedom and the means of retaliation upon the inmates of Angel Camp.

He saw that Jacques Renaire was not among the men seated at the table and felt relieved, for he was afraid of the white-headed dwarf's sharp eyes.

He reached the door in safety, made his way up the narrow crooked stairs and jumped toward the spot where he knew the outer door was concealed. The couple of planks were pulled out and he pushed against the rock. It gave way and Sleepless Eye stepped out with a feeling of triumph in his heart under the bright sunlight.

He was about to give vent to an expression of joy when he found himself looking into the muzzle of a repeating rifle.

Black Bart's finger was on the trigger and Jacques Renaire had him covered with a six-shooter.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEW STATION-MASTER.

At Pinewood Railroad Station a woman was wearily pacing up and down the lonely platform. The time was noon, and the sun poured down in a flood of golden glory that lightened up even the dejected countenance of the solitary promenader.

Neatly attired, though with an absence of any jewelry or other ornaments, the woman yet bore the impress of good breeding and would have been recognized as a lady under any circumstances.

Ever and anon she would glance earnestly up and down the track, the burnished rails of which, like silver streaks, seemed to meet ere they melted away in the horizon.

Not another soul was to be seen.

She was evidently waiting for some one, and, judging from her expressions of impatience, had spent some time already at the rendezvous.

"I wonder if he will keep his appointment," muttered Madame Ponoisi, for she it was. "I have confidence in him to that extent. I never yet knew him to break his word."

Five minutes more of suspense and then—the figure of a man was seen approaching from the back of the little shed in which the ticket-seller, station-master and telegraph operator, all in one person, was seated listening to the eternal clicking of his instrument.

"At last!" said Madame Ponoisi.

The man stepped out of the shadow of the building and stood revealed in the broad light as Dr. Milton, as cool, calm and dignified as when he took his seat in the railroad car at the San Francisco depot.

"I am here!" he said, quietly.

"Yes," from Madame Ponoisi, who tried with but ill success to emulate the coolness of Doctor Milton.

"Now, what have you to say to me?" he asked, as he removed his fashionable silk hat and wiped his forehead daintily with a silk handkerchief.

"Oh, man! man!" burst from Madame Ponoisi, as she tapped her foot in uncontrollable impatience on the platform. "Have you any human feeling, or are you really the icicle you pretend to be? Is it not enough that you have ruined my life, separated me from my children and defrauded me of my property? Is it not enough that you have *almost* made me what you wish—a maniac? Is not all this enough without subjecting me to your taunts now that we have at last met face to face?"

"You are fanciful, madame!"

"Fanciful!" returned Madame Ponoisi, bitterly. "Yes, I suppose I am. I am imaginative, no doubt. It was only my imagination, I suppose, when I heard you making a compact with those villainous dwarfs, a compact that not only made you an accessory to a crime but dragged into sin a young man for whom your feelings should have pleaded with trumpet tongues. Yes, no doubt I am fanciful!"

"I really don't see what all this talk has to do with the present occasion. It may possibly be an amusement to you to fall into heroics, but to me I confess it is somewhat tiresome," said Dr. Milton, carelessly, as he looked up and down the track.

"Henry Milton, there are a hundred thousand dollars in cold coin deposited in three banks in San Francisco that belong to me and that you are holding against my will. That money I intend to have."

"All of it?" asked her companion, quietly, though there was a touch of irony in his tone.

"That depends on circumstances. Put me right before the world; undo as far as you can the foul injustice you have done me for the past two years, and I shall be only too willing to provide for you respectably and comfortably."

"You are very good."

"I understand the sneer," said Madame Ponoisi. "Of course you think I cannot prove my claim. If you are depending on my weakness in that respect you will find yourself foiled."

"Well, what are your terms?"

"These—in a few words: First, acknowledge

me as your lawful wife before the world by announcing through the society columns of a San Francisco newspaper that I have returned from an extended visit to Europe, speaking of me as Mrs. Dr. Milton. Next, give me my marriage-certificate, which I feel certain you have in your possession. Then, tell Pauline who her real parents are; and finally, sign a paper promising never to molest me in the future."

"That all?"

"Yes. I shall then, on the completion of the arrangement, turn over to you \$20,000 for your own use and benefit. Our son Ralph I will provide for separately."

"Doesn't it strike you that it would be very foolish in me to take \$20,000 when I already have \$100,000 in my possession?"

"That \$100,000 I tell you I intend to force you to give up. I have able advisers to assist me in legal proceedings."

"Do you remember signing a certain paper a little over two years ago—a paper that gave me full control of your property—\$100,000—to control absolutely and use as I should see fit?"

"Certainly not," returned Madame Ponoisi, disdainfully, "I did not sign any such paper."

"Do you remember signing a paper at all about that time? Do you remember one evening when you were sitting at the organ in the parlor, with the gas turned low, that I asked you to sign a document in relation to the renting of a small house you owned at that time? Do you remember that you affixed your signature in the semi-darkness without reading the paper, and that your signature was witnessed by a little man whom you saw then for the first time, and whom I introduced to you as Mr. Renaire? Do you remember all that?"

"What?" almost screamed Madame Ponoisi, "do you mean to say that you were actually robbing me on that evening when your words in their gentleness and loving tenderness whispered of happier days of the past, and I almost felt as if the lover of my youth were bending over me?"

"Divested of all the slush-gush, that is about the size of it," returned Doctor Milton, coolly. "You deeded the property to me, and I have the paper safely in my possession to-day."

"Show it to me."

"Oh, no; I am not so foolish as to carry such a valuable article in my pocket on a long railroad journey. It is in a place of safety in San Francisco."

"I will not believe it until I see it."

"You can do so by going to the city."

"I will go."

"With me?"

"When do you go?"

"To-day."

"What were you doing here? Your mission for the Renaires took you some distance beyond here. That I know."

"You know too much."

"Perhaps. Mind I do not prove it to you in an uncomfortable fashion. A woman's hand can set the machinery of the law in motion very easily. You know whether you have occasion to fear the prying of police officers into your actions of late."

For the first time during the interview Dr. Milton appeared disturbed. His brows contracted into a dark frown, and there was an ugly glitter in the eyes that looked searchingly at his companion.

The clicking of the telegraph instrument a few yards away broke upon the stillness like the song of an industrious bird whose notes had become exceedingly flat, and the operator sat over his table all unconscious that a man and woman almost at his elbow were each trying to intimidate the other.

And yet, if that matter-of-fact operator had not sat so unconcernedly in his little den, who knows but that the long, slim fingers of Dr. Milton had grasped the throat of his companion with deadly purpose and extinguished the life that only stood between himself and a cherished object?

Upon such trifles do our fates often hang!

After a long pause, during which Dr. Milton seemed to be trying to read the very soul of Mme. Ponoisi, the latter repeated her question:

"When do you start for San Francisco?"

"I told you. To-day."

"At what time?"

"The train passes through here at seven o'clock."

"Reaching the city at three in the morning, or thereabouts, I suppose?"

"At 3:45."

"I will go with you."

"Good."

"And you will show me that paper?"

"Certainly."

"I can easily prove it a fraud."

"I doubt it."

"You will see. By the way, Ralph will accompany us. You know he is here, no doubt?"

"Yes. He got off the train and I have seen him in the town, though he did not recognize me."

"Of course, not," retorted Madame Ponoisi, significantly.

"Be careful how you talk before him," hissed Doctor Milton, fiercely, grasping her wrist.

"He does not suspect at present, and if he discovers anything I shall know who to blame, and," he added, with a meaning frown, "how to punish!"

"I care not for your threats, but I will keep your disgraceful secret."

"That is sufficient. Have you anything more to say to me now?"

"I do not think so. We will settle the rest of our business in San Francisco. Were there not others concerned besides myself I would never return to that city, even for an hour. As it is, I will go in the interests of truth and justice."

"All very pretty," sneered Doctor Milton. "Will you be here at seven o'clock? We may as well travel together. Perhaps we may hit upon a settlement of our difficulty during the journey."

"It must be on my terms," said Madame Ponoisi.

Doctor Milton shrugged his shoulders.

"I mean what I say," said Madame Ponoisi.

"Well, I won't argue the matter any longer with you just now. Will you bring Ralph with you? I have other business to transact in Pine-wood before I leave so that I will have no time to hunt him up. You can explain to him. But—*be careful what you say*."

"I will be careful."

"Very well, then; until seven o'clock."

"Good-afternoon," replied Madame Ponoisi.

Doctor Milton bowed with an air of great respect, raised his silk hat half a foot from his head and sauntered leisurely away.

Madame Ponoisi stood still looking after him as he picked his way daintily through the dust and even the rough boulders that were scattered about the roadway that led into the heart of the little town.

"There he goes—a man whose natural abilities should have placed him on the pinnacle of fame in his profession or in any walk of life he might have chosen to enter. And yet—and yet—even according to his own confession he is a heartless villain to whom a lie is too sacred to restrain him from crime. Ah! Woe is me! I can hardly believe that he, the father of my boy, is the guilty thing he has painted himself. Well, I will go to Ralph and prepare him for the journey. The poor lad will be worrying himself over my long absence."

Slowly she moved away, evidently in deep thought, and bent her steps in the direction of the house of Mr. Strood, or, as we know him—Sleepless Eye, the detective.

No sooner had she disappeared than it became evident that the interview on the depot platform had not taken place with quite as much privacy as the participants believed.

There had been a quiet, unobtrusive listener to every word spoken.

From out the shadow of the building in which the telegraph instrument kept up its tireless ticking stepped a man. A fine specimen of American manhood was he. His age anywhere between thirty and forty; his keen eyes and bronzed cheek spoke of a life passed on the plains of the Great West. There was an anxious expression on his face at this moment as he stood watching the retreating form of Madame Ponoisi, but it could not obliterate the lines around his mouth that told of a naturally joyous disposition more prone to laughter than mourning.

Such was our old friend, Colonel Blunt, when we meet him again on this quiet railroad platform, where everything seems to be taking its noonday nap save the brass sounder spelling out Morse letters and words for the benefit of station-masters at different points up and down the mighty Union Pacific R. R.

"So, they go to San Francisco together, do they? Well, well. I should like to know just who will be on that train. I know one party who will go. He is a gentleman with whom I am pretty well acquainted, and his name is Joe Blunt. I am going to interview Doctor Milton before I am much older, and I think I can scare him so badly that he will let that poor woman have her rights. I wish I could come across Sleepless Eye. Things are so arranged at this house now that I don't care about going there. What with that cursed Victor Renaire and that son of Milton's hanging around the house I don't know what to make of it. Then Madame Ponoisi is staying there, too. The house seems to be running like a third-class hotel at fair time.

At this moment the station-master came out of his house to take a breath of fresh air and Colonel Blunt walked toward him.

"There is a train for San Francisco about 7 o'clock isn't there?"

"Yes. And I guess there will be several parties going from here this evening. It don't stop unless I flag it."

"I want to go, too. I suppose I can get my ticket just before she starts?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you."

The station-master turned as if going into his little office. Then he stopped and stepping up to Colonel Blunt said:

"Have you ever seen me before?"

"No. I was thinking you were a new man here."

"Look at me again."

"You are a stranger to me," said Blunt, after a prolonged stare.

With a dexterous movement the station-master lifted his cap and a false mustache and whiskers from his face, and Blunt started back in astonishment.

The new station-master was his missing partner, Sleepless Eye, the Detective!

CHAPTER XVII.

SLEEPLESS EYE SHOWS HIS SPEED.

"OH, give us a rest," said Sleepless Eye, when he found himself confronted in so threatening a fashion by Black Bart and Jacques Renaire, as he emerged from Angel Camp. "Put that popgun of yours down, Bart, and you, too, Renaire. What's the use of wasting two or three good cartridges on me? You couldn't tear a hole in my shirt without putting a rope around your own necks. You know that as well as I do—especially you, Ba t."

"Dead men tell no tales," grumbled Jacques Renaire. "Besides, you killed Bill Watkins right before my eyes and murder is a crime that should be punished by death, every time. That's according to Blackstone and United States laws, I think."

"You do well to talk of crime and law, Jacques Renaire," was Sleepless Eye's unflinching reply. "Mind that you don't get too much law some time."

"Let us shoot him, Bart," said Jacques, his passion-distorted face as white as his hair.

"Wait a minute," said Black Bart.

"Yes, I think you had better not do anything hastily," put in Sleepless Eye, quietly.

"Look out, Bart, the cuss is reaching for his pistols," said Jacques, suddenly.

"Hands up, Sleepless Eye!" yelled Black Bart, fiercely.

Sleepless Eye involuntarily threw up his hands as Black Bart raised his rifle a little as if about to shoot.

"It is all right," said the detective, "I only wanted to see if they were there."

"Get back in there," said Black Bart. "I guess we will keep you away from the daylight for a few hours longer."

Sleepless Eye turned half-around to go into the cave and Jacques Renaire put his pistol in his belt.

This was Sleepless Eye's chance!

With a bound he had reached the outer air again.

His left fist shot out under Jacques Renaire's chin and that estimable gentleman measured his length on the turf, while his hat flew off and his villainous white head glistened in the sunlight, like a wicked old snowball.

At the same moment Black Bart's Winchester rifle was violently wrenched from him, and before either of the desperadoes had recovered from their astonishment, Sleepless Eye was half-way to the clump of trees that would afford cover from any shots that might be sent after him.

Black Bart pulled a six-shooter from his belt and commenced firing at the flying detective.

Sleepless Eye expected this performance, and therefore made his flight as irregular as possible.

He dodged from side to side, occasionally ducking his head and even stooping down, with the idea of presenting as difficult a mark to his enemies as possible.

The bullets whistled in uncomfortable proximity to his head, notwithstanding.

They came quicker after the first minute, and then he knew the dwarf was helping his comrade in the fusillade.

"This is getting warm," thought Sleepless Eye to himself, "and I am still several hundred yards from the trees. I'll have to check them a little."

He swung Black Bart's rifle around so as to get his right hand on the lock and his finger on the trigger.

Then he suddenly stopped, took a quick aim, and fired.

The bullet passed through the crown of Black Bart's hat, and caused that worthy to slacken his pace for an instant.

Jacques Renaire, however, kept on blazing away as persistently as ever. He had emptied one revolver, and was pretty nearly through another.

"All right, my sawed-off friend, I guess you want some too," was Sleepless Eye's mental observation.

He turned, and sent another bullet flying from his Winchester.

This time there was a howl of pain from Jacques Renaire.

His pistol flew out of his hand, and his right arm hung limp and useless at his side.

"Hit?" asked Black Bart, hurriedly.

"Yes, blast him! He has broken my arm, I guess."

"Well, we will have to let him go this time, I suppose. He has the best of us."

Sleepless Eye seemed to think so too, for he dropped into a leisurely walk, and as he vanished among the trees stopped to take a long look at Black Bart and Jacques Renaire.

He was evidently sizing them up and register-

ing a vow to make it warm for them in the near future.

The two confederates walked disconsolately back to Angel Camp, entered by the door through which Sleepless Eye had taken his leave, and carefully closed the aperture.

"It seems to me as if this camp and its arrangements are known to half the people in California," was Black Bart's disgusted remark, as he preceded the dwarf down the narrow spiral staircase. "The best thing the boys can do will be to follow the advice I gave them before, and get out of this."

"How are they to do it?" asked Jacques Renaire.

"Simply by closing it up and scattering."

"That is easy to say, but it takes money to travel in these times," was the dwarf's reply, as the two reached the large room in which Sleepless Eye had left the gang playing poker and drinking whisky.

A turbulent scene broke upon their vision.

The sorry plight of Sam Shaw had just been discovered.

Ed Ralston, who was soberer than the rest had noticed that the door of the small room had been left open, and that the supposed Sam Shaw had marched to the other end of the large apartment and gone toward the exit.

Then he heard a groan, and going inside the small room found Sam Shaw sitting on the ground in a dazed condition, with his hand to his head.

A drink of water dashed with whisky was administered, and Sam Shaw soon revived sufficiently to tell what he knew of Sleepless Eye's escape, which was not very much.

It was at this juncture that Black Bart and Jacques Renaire made their appearance.

Black Bart briefly detailed the manner of Sleepless Eye's departure and then announced that he must go himself, as he had business that required his attention away from Angel Camp.

"Oh, stay a while, Bart," came from a chorus of voices, as half-a-dozen tin cups full of whisky were held toward him. "You haven't put in an hour in camp for over a month. Besides, we have a matter to fix up to-day that you can help us in."

"Very sorry, boys, but I can't stay."

"Let us send some one else to fix up your business outside," said Ed Ralston. "Here's Jacques Renaire. He has a splendid head for business and would drive a better bargain for you than you could yourself. Wouldn't you, Jacques?"

"I'd do 'most anything if somebody would clap a bandage around this sore arm," was Jacques Renaire's reply. "Sleepless Eye plowed it open with one of his bullets."

Ed Ralston, who had just finished plastering the head of Sam Shaw, came over to the dwarf, helped him off with his coat and looked at the arm.

"It is only a little flesh wound, Jacques. A handkerchief around it will be all that is required."

This primitive operation was soon performed and the dwarf was assisted into his coat once more.

"Well, good-by, boys," said Black Bart, as he moved toward the door. "Take care of yourselves and look out for Sleepless Eye. He means mischief toward some of us, as sure as you are born."

"Then you can't stay?"

"No."

"Don't try to stop him. I guess there is a woman in the case. Black Bart can't resist female influences any more than the rest of us," croaked Jacques Renaire, with one of his ugliest grins.

"If I wish to have my private affairs talked over in camp, I would open the subject myself," said Black Bart, quietly, but with a dangerous flash in his dark eyes and a compression of the lips that told of inward rage.

"That's right," assented Ed Ralston, who was sober enough to see that Black Bart did not wish to be trifled with. "Jacques was out of order."

But the tantalizing little wretch could not keep his mouth shut. He enjoyed the sensation of inflicting annoyance upon any one for its own sake; so he continued:

"I have heard that Black Bart is soon going to be married again for the fifth time, and that the lady keeps a saloon in Frisco, down near Chinatown. How is that, Bart? Is there anything in it?"

Jacques said afterward that he thought his collar-bone was broken when he went flying under the table.

Black Bart had planted his ponderous fist full in the mouth of the dwarf, and two front teeth were gone forever; they went right down the throat of their owner.

With a howl of mingled rage and pain, the dwarf jumped to his feet with bowie-knife in hand.

A dozen of the robbers sprung in front of him, however, and snatched the knife from him before he could strike.

Black Bart stood with folded arms, unmoved.

"Let him come for me, if he wants to. I'll take care of him."

"No, no. He got what he deserved. But we can't afford to fight among ourselves just now," said Ed Ralston. "Quit your fooling, Jacques; you know as well as I do that it wouldn't pay just now."

Jacques said nothing, but ceased struggling with those who were holding him back, and walked to the other end of the long room.

Then the others looked around for Black Bart, but he was gone.

He had taken advantage of the momentary withdrawal of attention from him, and had made his way out of camp.

"That's just like Black Bart," said Ralston. "He comes and goes without much ceremony."

"Well, now about the job," interrupted Sam Shaw, as he felt the bandage on his head to see if it was all right. "Who is going to lead us in the business? Since Bill Watkins passed in his checks we are without a captain."

"Let's have an election now," suggested Ralston.

"That's what!" exclaimed half a dozen voices.

"Well, each man will write his choice on a slip of paper, and put it in this hat," said Ralston, taking off his greasy old head-covering and putting it on the table.

The election was the work of a few minutes. It resulted in the unanimous choice of Ed Ralston.

The tin cups of whisky were handed around, and after everybody had had his drink, the new captain made a short address, thanking his pals for the honor they had done him, and promising to do his best to help them on to fortune.

His speech was received with boisterous cheering, and then Ralston gave his first orders as captain.

"Is everybody properly heeled?" was his first question.

There was a general feeling in belts for revolvers and knives, and an examination of cartridges for rifles. The latter were piled up in a corner.

"I guess we have all got our weapons handy," said Sam Shaw, replying for the rest to the captain's question.

"Very well. Now, the train passes through Pinewood at seven o'clock. It is due at Snaggs's Bottom at 9:15. If it is flagged it will stop there. There is no house within a mile of the station, and the fellow in charge is a young snoozer from the East.

"That is satisfactory," broke in Jacques Renaire.

"Yes, that's business," grunted Sam Shaw.

"Now," proceeded Ralston, "it wouldn't do for all of us to appear at the station in a body. My plan is for Jacques to show himself there—Snaggs's Bottom—so that the train can be flagged for him. Then, in going along the Bottom there is a pretty steep up-grade, and it will take the engine some time to get up speed. Well, there is any amount of cover each side of the track. Six men on one side, six on the other, and Shaw and me toward the front where the rail will be *accidentally broken*, and where there *may be* a chunk of wood across the track, ought to be enough to make things pleasant for all the parties who are present at the picnic. What do you think of it, boys?"

"Good! Good!"

"So I say. Well, it is twelve o'clock now, and I think we had better be moving."

An hour later the cave was empty, save for one man—the Frank already mentioned as keeping the door and receiving the password from those who entered by way of the tree-trunk.

The rest of the band had started for Snaggs's Bottom, where the nature of their business can easily be divined.

They had not all gone together, but had broken up the party into little groups of two, three or four, but all were making, by a more or less circuitous route, for the same place where the "young snoozer from the East" was receiving some rather startling information and instructions from Sleepless Eye over the electric wire.

Frank had dropped into a sort of doze, partly because he had drank a good deal of whisky, and partly because he was alone and naturally lazy.

He sat by the table, nodding and catching himself with a start for an hour after the rest had left him.

Then he thought he would walk about the room again for a while, to keep himself awake.

He had marched up and down once, and was about to start again, when some unaccountable feeling made him take a light and glance into the room in which Sleepless Eye had twice been confined.

If ever there was an astonished man on earth it was this same Frank Smith when he saw that the room was not untenanted.

Huddled up in a corner, as if she had been thrown down in a heap, was as pretty a young girl as he had ever seen in the course of his rather checkered existence.

He rubbed his bleared eyes once or twice, but that didn't dispel the vision.

The girl was there undoubtedly, though ap-

parently in an unconscious condition. Her fair hair hung loosely over her shoulders, and her face was white and still, but *the hair and face were those of Garnett*.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE COW-CATCHER.

NIGHT!

A train rushing through the darkness at the rate of half a mile a minute.

The engineer has a steady hand on the throttle, and as his fireman opens the door of the firebox to heap on some more fuel, a ruddy glare is thrown on the faces of the two men upon whose careful attention to duty depends the safety of some three hundred souls in the five cars behind the locomotive.

The engineer was an old hand. He had worked his way up from the lowest grade of railroad labor, until now he held the high and responsible position of engineer of the "Lightning Express."

He could not see further ahead than the space on the track that was illuminated by the headlight, but he kept a sharp lookout for signals and was quite easy in his mind about everything connected with his train.

"Old Ninety-six," is humping along in good shape to-night," he observed, to his fireman as they rounded a curve and plunged into a wood, where the whispering pines bent and rustled in the gentle evening breeze.

"Yes, she is doing well enough," said the fireman, carelessly. He was evidently thinking of something else and was not inclined for conversation.

"I've driven her for six years now, and I never knew her to hustle around that curve so smoothly before. She never jarred the least."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"We understand each other, don't we old girl?"

The engineer patted the mass of iron and brass as if it had been a living thing, and it almost seemed as if the engine knew what was said and throbbed with pleasure at receiving commendation from its master.

"There's Skunk Hollow. They are flagging us," said the fireman, shortly, as he stirred up the fire again.

"Wonder what they want? Must be some passengers," observed the engineer.

"Maybe."

"Rather an unusual thing, though."

"Yes."

"Well, we can easily make up our time, I guess. We'll have to. We have to meet the stage at Santora, whatever happens."

"That's so."

"I guess the stage will be on time," resumed the engineer; "unless Black Bart should be on the road. But I haven't heard of him since Sleepless Eye grabbed him that time. I guess he's keeping dark somewhere."

"I guess so."

Down brakes!

"Skunk Hollow!" yelled the brakeman, as he put his head inside the car door.

The train drew up at the little platform, and the fireman jumped off his engine as soon as the wheels ceased to turn.

"That's a queer rooster," said the engineer to himself. "I wonder who he is. He was put on at Pinewood. He had his credentials all right, signed by the superintendent, so I had to take him. I don't care about making a night-run with a strange man, and this fellow is about the strangest I ever met."

The next moment the fireman reappeared.

He took his place in the cab without a word.

The engineer looked at him inquiringly.

"What's the matter back there? Why don't the conductor start us?" he asked.

"Guess he isn't ready."

"He had better hurry up."

He leaned out of the cab and looked back along the train.

"Hello! What does this mean?" he exclaimed suddenly.

"What?" asked the fireman, in his impassive manner.

"Surely I saw it. But I will soon make up my mind. I'll go back there and see."

The engineer was about to leap off the engine, when the fireman put his hand on his arm, and asked him once more what it was that excited him.

"Why, I believe I saw a man climbing on the tender. By gracious! there goes another—and another! Grind my bones, if there ain't half a dozen fellows crawling over the coal. Hello, there!" he yelled, as he drew a revolver from his hip pocket. "I'll soon find out your little game."

"Start the engine and keep quiet!" said the fireman, quietly.

"What's that? Durn me if I don't believe you are in it, too!" retorted the engineer, as he pointed his revolver at the fireman.

"Put your gun in your pocket and listen to me. I can explain this in six words."

"Well, explain. We don't start until you have done so."

"I'll have to whisper," said the fireman, stepping toward his companion.

"Keep your hands up. I haven't got very

much faith in you," was the engineer's reply, with more candor than politeness.

The fireman shrugged his shoulders and held up his hands as he bent over to the ear of the engineer.

He whispered something that made the engineer start back in surprise.

"Is that possible?" he asked, as he stood surveying the fireman with wide-open eyes.

"Here is the proof," returned the fireman taking a small piece of paper from his pocket and showing it to the other.

"That's enough."

"All aboard!" rung out the conductor from the gloom at the other end of the platform.

There was a creak, a whistle, a scrape and the train was off again.

In a few minutes a strange man came climbing silently over the tender and stood between the fireman and engineer.

"How is it?" asked the fireman.

"All right."

"How many?"

"Eight."

"Heeled?"

"Up to the top notch."

"Fire up here."

"All right."

The stranger took the shovel and began industriously piling in coal.

The engine leaped forward with renewed life as the blazing fire behind the iron doors started up with a roar to lick the boiler and give the demon steam renewed strength.

"How long before we reach Snaggs's Bottom?" asked the fireman.

"Ten minutes," was the engineer's reply.

"You will be flagged at the station."

"Yes."

"You will disregard the signal and go ahead."

"But that will be breaking rules, and if there should be trouble—"

"I will take all the responsibility."

"Well, I suppose I must obey your orders."

"I suppose you must," said the fireman, coolly.

"Are you sure I shall be flagged?"

"I know what I am talking about."

Strangely enough the position of the engineer and his fireman seemed to be reversed.

The engineer took his orders from the fireman, instead of giving them.

The man who was handling the shovel took no notice of anything save his work of firing up.

Yet he was armed to the teeth.

In a belt that was partly concealed by his rough sack-coat were two heavy six-shooters, while a Winchester repeating rifle leaned in a corner of the cab where he had placed it when he first made his appearance.

He looked like a man who would be perfectly at home in a scrimmage.

Was a scrimmage likely?

That no one seemed to know.

"Watch things closely. I am going back to the tender," said the fireman.

"You will come back, I suppose?" asked the engineer.

"Yes; I only want to see that everything is ready for business."

The fireman crawled over the coal, and disappeared from view behind the heap.

There he found eight men lying on the coal, and disposed so that they would not be observed easily, even if there had been light.

To each man the fireman addressed a few questions, asking if their arms were all ready for instant use, and whether they thoroughly understood what they had to do.

The answers were all satisfactory, and the fireman made his way back to the cab.

He took with him a repeating rifle from the tender, and leaned it in the corner with that of his substitute as fireman.

"What weapons have you?" he asked the engineer.

"A pair of six-shooters."

"You'll use them, if necessary, I suppose?"

"That is what I calculate to do every time," was the ready reply.

"All right. Keep steady. Aim low, if you have to, and stoop down when the time comes."

"Where do you expect the trouble?"

"Along Snaggs's Bottom."

"Who are they?"

"The Angel Camp Gang."

The engineer screwed up his mouth as if he were whistling. If he made any sound, it was drowned in the noise of the rushing wheels as the engine and its five cars tore along toward Snaggs's Bottom.

"Who is leading them?"

"Ed Ralston."

"Where is Bill Watkins?"

"Wiped out."

"That's good, anyhow."

"So I think."

"Hallo! There's the red light."

"Snaggs's Bottom Station. Well, don't stop."

"I'll do as you say, but it seems a rather risky thing. If those fellows have put anything on the track along there, we may be hustled into Kingdom Come before we are ten minutes older."

The fireman did not answer. He made a ro-

tion to the man who was firing up to take hold of the brake, while he himself pushed the engineer to one side and grasped the lever bar that controlled the throttle-valve, so that he could stop the engine if necessary.

Whizz!

They rattled through Snaggs's Bottom, catching a hasty glimpse of a little man with snow-white hair, standing, with a surprised look on his monkey-like features, by the side of the "snoozer from the East."

"Fooled you this time, Jacques," said the fireman to himself, as he saw Jacques turn around and walk back from the railroad.

At this moment somebody clutched the fireman by the throat, and before his companions could get to his assistance, he and his assailant had rolled off the cab, locked in a deadly embrace.

The whole thing had taken place so quickly, the stranger had come over from the tender so quietly, and the fireman had been overpowered so completely, that the engineer and his remaining companion seemed to be completely paralyzed.

"They must be ground to mince-meat," said the engineer, as he took his place at the lever and tried to pierce the darkness ahead.

"Yes, I am afraid so," said the other. "I—

"Look! Look!" shrieked the engineer. "The coupling has broken, and the train is going backward!"

It was even so.

Right between the engine and tender the connection had been broken.

The engine was rushing up the grade, but the rest of the train, released from the locomotive, was running back at a gradually increasing speed.

"Down with your brake," yelled the engineer.

The other grabbed the brake and hugged the wheel with desperate strength.

At the same time the engineer shut down the lever, and the engine gradually slackened. Another minute, and the machine came to a stop.

The engineer jumped down and ran to the front of the locomotive.

There, on the cowcatcher, was his fireman trying to tear himself from the grasp of the stranger who had sprung upon him in the cab, and who was thought to have met his death with his antagonist under the wheels of the train.

How they had escaped death was a mystery.

Still more strange was it that they had been able to work themselves around to the front of the engine, while struggling to throw each other from the pulsing, throbbing, terrible machine, that was plowing its way over the California prairie and through the wood-bordered bottom-lands!

There they were, however, and the fireman seemed to be getting the best of the contest.

He had his antagonist lying on his back on the narrow ledge under the headlight, with his head drooping backward over the cowcatcher.

Each held a knife in his hand, but the fireman seemed to be in little danger from that of his foe.

The latter was at a disadvantage, and he was evidently aware of the fact. The fireman had his knife up ready to strike just as the engineer appeared.

"Hold on!" he yelled. "Give the man a chance."

He just had time to note that the man who was about to die under his fireman's knife was a tall, clean-shaven, gentlemanly looking person when—

Bang! Bang!

Two shots from the side of the track knocked the knife out of the fireman's hand. His intended victim wriggled out of his grasp and in an instant was out of sight in the bushes.

A mocking laugh came echoing back and as the engineer and his fireman got in the cab for safety from the shots that were rattling around them the latter hissed through his teeth:

"The time will yet come, Henry Milton, and then Sleepless Eye will cry quits!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VOICE FROM INVISIBLE LIPS.

We must go back a little to explain how Garnett found her way into the underground apartment in Angel Camp which had so lately served as a prison for Sleepless Eye.

When Ralph Milton burst into the room in Sleepless Eye's house and was confronted by Victor Renaire standing over the inanimate form of Garnett, he felt for the moment as if he would go out of his mind with rage and indignation.

"What have you done to her, villain?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing. It is you that are to blame if any harm has befallen her," returned Victor Renaire. "You came bouncing into the house, knocking down doors and acting like a lunatic generally, and then ask me what I have done. Ralph Milton, you are a fool."

"I can afford to despise your insults just

now," said Ralph. "But, once more, what have you been doing to that young lady, and what business have you in the house at all?"

"If it comes to that what business have you here? You are not the owner of it, I believe. If Mr. Strood wishes to know why I am here I can soon give him a satisfactory explanation. As for this girl, she is my ward, and I am not answerable to anybody for my dealing with her. I can tell you one thing, though; she is going back to San Francisco with me this evening. She is my runaway daughter in the eyes of the law, but she is quite willing to go home now."

Ralph moved hastily forward as he saw signs of returning animation in the fair young girl. Her cheeks took on a tinge of scarlet, her lips trembled and she moved her head slightly from side to side.

"Stand back, there," said Victor, barring Ralph's entrance with his hands. "I can attend to her. She doesn't want your assistance."

"Let her speak for herself," said Ralph, looking eagerly into the eyes of Garnett, who had now revived sufficiently to sit up on the carpet.

"Garnett!" continued Ralph. "Speak to me."

For a moment she fixed her gaze upon the face of the youth.

Then Victor Renaire placed his hand roughly on her shoulder.

She turned quickly and looked at him.

He bent his piercing eyes upon her and—her self-will was gone.

The white-headed little wretch had her completely in his power.

He smiled in his devilish way for the benefit of Ralph. Then he gave Garnett his hand and raised her from the floor.

She never removed her eyes from those of Victor, and seemed to be entirely unconscious of Ralph's presence.

Mme. Ponoisi, who had followed Ralph up the stairs, seemed to lose all her courage when she caught sight of Victor Renaire.

She sunk down almost to her knees and then managed to crawl down two or three steps where he would not see her from the room.

He had not observed her.

For that she felt thankful.

She accused herself of cowardice in not going to the assistance of Garnett, but she had not the strength, morally or physically, to enter that room.

"Garnett," said Victor, "do you not wish to go back to San Francisco with me?"

"Yes, I do," said Garnett, in a cold mechanical way.

"I always treat you kindly, do I not?"

"Yes."

"Do you want this young man, Ralph Milton, to take you under his care?"

"No!"

"Shall I tell him to leave us?"

"Yes."

"You hear, young man," went on Victor, turning to Ralph. "She says plainly enough that she does not desire your presence, and I am sure I don't."

"You villain, you exercise an unholy influence over that girl. This is not the first time I have seen it. The words she utters are not her own. You force her to pollute her innocent lips with the sentences that are the offspring of your brain, instigated by the heartless motives that sway all your actions."

"Have a care!" said Victor, threateningly, throwing a malignant glance at the young man. "Remember that I hold a power over your father that may mean more trouble for him and his than you suspect."

"What can you do to hurt my father? I don't believe you have any such hold upon him as you pretend. He has always led an upright life, and if there is either who fears the other, it must be you, whose ways of existence are more than doubtful."

"Oh, Ralph, for my sake—" burst from Garnett.

But in an instant Victor turned on her and she became the same impassive creature she had been before the temporary taking off of Victor Renaire's attention had enabled her real feelings to assert themselves.

"Victor Renaire, I insist upon taking that young lady down-stairs," said Ralph, fiercely.

"Ralph Milton, you will do nothing of the kind," retorted Victor Renaire. "This young lady is going back to San Francisco in my charge on the train that leaves here at 7:15 tonight, and if you want to see her at any time, you know my address."

Ralph was about to make a hot reply, but he thought he read in the eyes of Garnett a mute request that he would not argue any longer. He, therefore, without another word, turned and went down-stairs. At the foot he found Mme. Ponoisi leaning against the wall, as if overcome with emotion.

"Oh, if Mr. Strood were here," she whispered.

"Yes, I wish he were," said Ralph. "I can not imagine where he is. I am afraid he may have got into trouble with some of the gang again."

"I suppose we can do nothing except wait for him. That little villain up-stairs seems to have

taken possession of the house. I don't think he dare interfere with me here, and yet I am afraid to meet him. He seems to be more than human, and to have an almost fiendish power over nearly everybody with whom he comes in contact. Let us go out. You walk about near the house and I will go to the railroad depot. I have a fancy for taking a solitary walk."

"All right, mother. Good-by for the present."

"Good-by, my son."

The two separated, Ralph marching up and down, sentry fashion, in front of the house, and Mme. Ponoisi making her way to the depot, where, as we have seen, she had an interview of rather an important character with Doctor Milton.

"Now, Garnett, you will stay here until I return," said Victor Renaire, as soon as they were alone. "I am going out for half an hour, but I shall know everything you do, notwithstanding. If you move out of this room it will be a bad thing for you."

"Can I not go down stairs, Victor?" asked Garnett, pleadingly.

She had strong hopes that Mr. Strood might return before the dwarf, and in that case she felt sure that her troubles would be over. Even Victor Renaire would not dare to oppose her dear old friend and protector, Mr. Strood.

It is probable that Victor Renaire divined what was passing in her mind.

He was not the man to be easily deceived by a young girl who showed her emotions as plainly as did Garnett.

"You will stay in this room," he repeated. "Go out at your peril."

He put on his plug hat, and with a sanctimonious smile that harmonized well with his white hair and respectable suit of black marched out, taking his way toward Angel Camp.

For half an hour Garnett sat quietly in the room, thinking over her adventures of the last few days, but not daring to move.

Where was Ralph, she wondered.

She walked to the window and looked out.

Who was that pacing up and down in front of the house?

The fluttering of her heart told her that it was indeed the youth for whom she experienced sensations that she had never known before meeting him.

Would he look up?

No, he walked along, with his eyes on the ground, as if lost in thought.

Should she tap on the window to try and attract his attention?

She had her hand raised and then she thought of Victor Renaire.

What if Ralph should hear her, and should come up? What had she to say to him?

Then what if Victor Renaire should come and find him there?

No, it would not do.

She tore herself away from the window and paced up and down the room.

She would not stay there!

She felt as if she must breathe the fresh air.

She would go out. She would try to find Mr. Strood. Renaire need never know.

Besides, what if he did know as long as she found the friend she sought?

She would go!

She ran out of the room, got her hat from her bedroom and ran lightly down the stairs. She looked in all the lower rooms, but they were all deserted.

She was alone.

She tripped out of the front door and looked up and down for Ralph. But he had disappeared.

Now, where was her father—the only father she had ever known—Mr. Strood?

She instinctively turned her steps toward the open country at the back of the house and walked quickly toward the wood in the distance.

Unconsciously she was going toward Angel Camp!

Something impelled her to move along quickly!

Some force that she could not analyze drew her along and she ran until she was almost out of breath.

As she entered the wood and plunged through the shadow cast upon the earth by the mighty monarchs of the forest, she fancied she heard her name pronounced by some one whose voice she knew.

She stopped and listened!

"Garnett!"

She trembled with pleasure. It was the voice of her father, Mr. Strood!

"Garnett!"

"Yes, father!"

"Garnett!"

"Yes, my father; I am here!" she cried, as she quickened her pace and made her way through the thick underbrush and stepped over fallen logs, lying damp and decaying across her path.

"Garnett!"

Where did the voice come from?

She had run several hundred yards, and still the cry seemed to keep just the same distance from her.

Surely her father would not call her and

make her run through the wood just for the sake of tantalizing her.

And if she could hear his voice so plainly, why could he not distinguish hers?

"Garnett!"

Again! Where was he? Oh, what did it mean?

Could it be possible that there was something unearthly about those accents that sounded so familiar, and yet did not seem to come from the mouth of mortal being?

She would find him!

She made a desperate rush forward, and tripped over a branch that had fallen and then been covered with underbrush so that it could not be seen.

She fell heavily and was partially stunned. As she arose in her half-dazed condition, she heard the voice right in her ear:

"Ga nett!"

"Yes, father," she exclaimed, in a perfect agony of eagerness and terror.

But the sighing of the autumn breeze through the leaves and the humming of the insects at her feet was the only reply to her cry.

She sped on and emerged from the wood into the broad, open daylight. She came out of the clump of trees just about in the place that Sleepless Eye had reached when running away from Black Bart and Jacques Renaire.

She wandered on, not knowing where she was going, and thinking only of the mysterious pronunciation of her own name by her father—Mr. Strood.

Suddenly she stopped!

Could it be possible? Was that indeed Victor Renaire standing in front of her, a few yards away?

All doubt was speedily removed when that white-headed worthy sternly addressed her.

"Garnett, you have disobeyed me. Come here."

Mechanically she obeyed, moving slowly through the grass.

She had nearly reached him, when the ground seemed to give way beneath her feet, and she sank down—down into the very bowels of the earth!

She had slipped down the shaft that gave air to the subterranean dungeon of Angel Camp.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT IS THE COMBINATION?

SEATED in a car on the train that had been uncoupled at Snaggs's Bottom and was rapidly backing down the incline was Mme. Ponoisi.

She had taken a bold course in venturing alone with Doctor Milton toward San Francisco, the city in which she had suffered so many wrongs and indignities, but she felt that her only chance for future peace and comfort depended on her present action.

Had not this become so firmly impressed upon her mind she would never have left Pinewood while Garnett remained in the power of Victor Renaire and while the young girl remained practically without a protector.

Ralph had refused to come with her, saying that he was going to stay in Pinewood, at least until Mr. Strood returned to his home. Then, if the saving her from Victor Renaire's clutches required the assistance of a pair of willing hands, guided by the impulses of a youthful heart, Garnett should never have an opportunity to say that Ralph Milton was slow in tendering his services, even unto the death.

All this he had told Mme. Ponoisi, and she could not, for the life of her, dissuade him.

Though she trembled for his safety, she could but admire his manly and devoted spirit, and she told him to stay, promising to return within a day or two if she heard nothing from him.

"I hope to be in San Francisco before you return, mother," said Ralph, cheerfully.

"Well, time will tell."

"Yes, let us hope it will be a happy tale, mother."

"Amen!" replied Mme. Ponoisi, as she bade her son good-by and made her way to the railroad station.

The train arrived nearly on time and soon she and Doctor Milton were safely aboard and on their way to San Francisco.

They were not very social as they sat there on that crowded car.

It was noticed by several of the other passengers that the lady seemed lost in thought, apparently not of a pleasant nature, while the tall, clean-shaven, gentlemanly-looking person by her side kept glancing nervously up and down the car and occasionally trying to pierce the fast-gathering gloom outside.

After a time he walked out of the car and did not return.

The lady kept watching the door anxiously, but though it swung open a good many times to admit or let out the conductor, the brakemen and an occasional restless passenger, the tall, clean-shaven gentleman was not among them.

The train sped on.

Snaggs's Bottom Station was reached, and though we know there was a good deal of excitement around the engine, the passengers were in blissful unconsciousness regarding it.

A jerk as the train started and gradually got up speed.

Then another jar. This time of a peculiarly grinding nature as if the brakes were refusing to work.

The train gradually slackened.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed some one in the car. "There is trouble of some kind."

"Oh, I guess not," replied some one else—a roughly-dressed fellow, with a lowering forehead, over which hung a matted fringe of red hair. "We have probably been flagged."

"Why, we are going back!" exclaimed the first speaker, "and I can hear the engine puffing a long way ahead. We have broken loose from the rest of the train."

"Well, never mind. We shall stop when we get to Snaggs's Bottom Station. The ground gets level there," said the red-headed man.

But the red-headed man was wrong!

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was a succession of terrible bumps, followed by the crashing of timber and glass, and the passengers were thrown out of their seats and piled up in the aisle indiscriminately and uncomfortably.

To add to the panic, the lamps in the car were upset and everything was in total darkness.

There was one more crash and then—stillness!

It seemed as if the passengers were for the moment completely paralyzed. Then shrieks of terror filled the car.

Ha! What is that?

And that?

Surely there are men stealthily crawling through the bushes that line the track!

That must have been the glint of a polished rifle barrel in the darkness within a few yards of the car in which Madame Ponoisi was trying to grope her way to the door.

No one seemed to be seriously hurt in the car and the slow movements of the passengers were more on account of the darkness than anything else.

Mme. Ponoisi reached the platform of the car and stood a moment considering what to do next.

Everything was in pitch darkness.

In the distance she could discern the lights on the locomotive that had broken loose, and it appeared to be moving slowly down the track to the train.

She had just time to note this, and then there broke out on all sides a racket that was absolutely demoniacal.

The whole scene was ablaze!

The flashing of gunpowder as repeating-rifles and revolvers were discharged lighted up the gloom in fitful scintillations like an electric storm.

The sharp crack of the weapons mingled with the hoarse cries of men reckless of life—either their own or that of others, while the screams of women and the murmuring of the more timid male passengers formed a weird and awesome accompaniment to the fiercer sounds of strife.

The train was attacked!

"The Angel Camp gang, by gracious!" exclaimed the conductor, who happened to be by the side of Mme. Ponoisi. "Let the women all get inside the cars and lie down on the floor. We shall have help directly."

"Oh, you will, eh?" said a voice from the bushes. "Then they had better hurry up."

"That's what, Ed," added another.

"Now, boys, forward!" yelled the first speaker, who was none other than Ed Ralston.

Several shots were fired by the train party, who had become used to the darkness by this time and managed to discern the advancing foe.

The fire was returned, but apparently no one on either side was injured so far.

Then the handful of men on the train who had weapons and the courage to use them were driven back and the robbers rushed toward the Express car, which was the chief point to which their efforts were directed.

It was locked, bolted and barred!

A couple of axes were brought forward and the attacking party proceeded to deliberately force their way in.

Bang! Batter! Crash!

No result save a shower of chips from the side of the car where the axes had torn the wood!

Slam! Swish! Cr-r-rack!

With a wild yell, the robbers clambered into the car!

Bang! bang!

Two shots from a revolver and Sam Shaw rolls back, mortally wounded.

Standing with his back to the safe, which contained \$450,000 in gold, stood the Express-agent.

His face was pale and looked ghastly as seen by the glimmer of the feeble oil lamp that swung over his head.

In his hand he held a revolver!

Two shots had already been fired from it, as we know, and, as the members of the lawless band shrunk back slightly when Sam Shaw fell with a bullet in his heart, the brave fellow leveled his pistol again in defense of the wealth intrusted to his care.

He took aim at the foremost man, who happened to be Ed Ralston.

It looked as if Ralston's time had come.

"Stand back, or, by Heavens! I'll spatter your brains all over the inside of your hat!" yelled the Express-agent.

Ed Ralston laughed carelessly and ran forward.

The Express-agent pulled the trigger, there was a flash and a loud report, and—

The bullet buried itself in the roof of the car.

At the critical moment his arm was seized in a vice-like grasp and thrown upward.

At the same instant a shriveled-up little man, with snow-white hair and a revolver in his hand, leered up into his face like a very wicked monkey.

It was Jacques Renaire!

How he had managed to get to the Express-agent without being observed must forever remain a mystery.

"Let go my arm, you imp!" cried the Express-agent, trying to free himself.

But he was like a baby in the hands of Jacques Renaire, and his struggles were ineffectual.

The robbers rushed upon him, and in a twinkling he was disarmed and lying helpless on the floor of the car, while the robbers were trying to open the safe.

"Give us the combination," said Jacques Renaire to the prostrate man, pointing a revolver at his head.

"I won't!" was the short answer.

"Give it to us, or—"

"Shoot if you want to; but you will never get my assistance in robbing the Express Company."

"Blow it open!" said Ed Ralston. "We can't stop to argue with that fellow."

"You have no time," interposed Jacques Renaire. "Don't you know that some one gave the job away, and that there is mighty little time for us to get through this thing, if we are going to have any swag to divide?"

"Hark!" said Ed Ralston.

"What is it?"

"Can't you hear?"

"It is, by Caesar!"

"Sure enough! It is the locomotive, and we don't know who is aboard."

"Are you going to give us that combination?" hissed Jacques Renaire once more in the ear of the Express-agent.

"No!"

"This is your last chance," said Jacques, holding the muzzle of his pistol against the agent's forehead.

The latter shuddered as he felt the cold steel, but there was no back-down in him. He met the gaze of Jacques Renaire firmly as he replied, slowly and coolly:

"You can shoot if you wish, but you will get nothing out of me."

"You won't tell, then?"

"Most emphatically, no!"

Jacques Renaire looked at the helpless man with something like admiration, as he said:

"I always keep my word. When I say I will shoot, I mean it."

"Shoot, then!" was the desperate reply, "and may the Lord have mercy on my soul!"

Still the dwarf hesitated.

Such indomitable pluck was not often met with, and he could hardly understand it.

Puff! puff! puff!

"There's the locomotive!" exclaimed Ed Ralston.

The Express car shook, as if the engine had run against the train.

Then there were cheers, and the round of shots fired quickly from a dozen weapons.

While the robbers had been in the Express car trying to get into the safe, everything had been quiet outside.

A certain number of the train robbers had been left to keep the passengers and train officials in awe.

Now, however, that the notes of strife came in a mighty burst of discord to the place where Ed Ralston and his companions had been so thoroughly balked in their designs, they knew that things must be getting lively with their friends outside.

"Curse you!" shrieked Jacques to the Express-agent. "You shall die!"

"Come on, Jacques," said Ed Ralston; "there's business for us away from here!"

"I'll be back in a few minutes!" hissed Jacques to the agent, who was helpless, as he lay on his back bound hand and foot.

He did not answer the dwarf, but listened intently to the turmoil outside.

The battle seemed to get nearer until, just as the last one of the robber gang followed Ed Ralston and Jacques Renaire from the car, the struggle seemed to be going on right at the door of his invaded sanctum.

He turned on his side and saw that a crowd of men were engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter, too close to use pistols, which had given place to knives.

Among them he saw a tall, clean-shaven, gentlemanly-looking man, who appeared to be cutting and slashing away so indiscriminately that he could not tell which side he was on.

Then the tall, gentlemanly-looking person vanished, and the crowd surged away from the door with a great noise of oaths and scraping feet.

Who would be successful?

What would be his own fate?

A moment later and a man in rough, working dress, smelling of oil and soot, sprung into the car.

It was the fireman who had the struggle on the cowcatcher!

He bent down over the Express-agent and quickly cut his bonds.

Then he helped him on his feet, and as he looked in his face by the light of the oil lamps yelled, in a perfect frenzy of delight:

"What! Colonel Blunt!"

"That's who I am, and, by jimmie! You are—"

"Sleepless Eye! As large as life!" replied the fireman.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW HE DID NOT GET THE EBONY BOX.

WE left Garnett lying in the underground dungeon in Angel Camp, where she had fallen down the shaft in the presence of Victor Renaire.

Though the distance from the ground to the floor of the apartment was very considerable, it must be remembered that the shaft was narrow and broke the severity of the fall.

Had it been otherwise she must have been killed instantly.

When she was found by Ed Ralston he was perfectly astounded, as well he might be.

Before there was time for any manifestations of surprise, however, Victor Renaire, who had rushed down the stairs into the heart of Angel Camp as soon as Garnett had dropped through the hole, elbowed his way through the crowd that was pressing around the unconscious girl, and quickly raised her to her feet.

As soon as he touched her she shivered violently, like a corpse under the influence of a galvanic battery.

Then she opened her eyes and looked straight into the glittering orbs of Victor Renaire.

"How now?" he said, savagely. "What fool's tricks are you playing? Come with me."

"Where am I?" she asked, in a dazed manner.

"Never mind. It is sufficient that I am with you. If you had not disobeyed me you would never have got into this scrape. It is a wonder you were not killed."

"Oh, yes, I remember now. I was walking along in the broad sunlight, and then—every-thing was dark."

"It will be a good deal darker for you if you don't come along with me without any further trouble," was Victor's vicious retort.

An hour later Garnett and Victor Renaire were at Sleepless Eye's house, where Garnett, who found the house empty, got her cloak, by Victor Renaire's orders and came out again, ready to do as he directed.

"Now," said he, "we are going back to San Francisco. It won't suit me to go by the train that leaves Pinewood. I am going to ride over in a wagon to where the Santora stage passes along the foot of the mountain. We'll go by stage to Santora, and then take the cars to Frisco."

Garnett bowed her head in acquiescence, and went whither she was led by the dwarf.

In his presence she had no will of her own.

In a short time she found herself riding along in a light wagon, with Victor Renaire by her side. He did not speak to her, and appeared to be wrapped in his own thoughts.

They rode along for several hours, until at last they reached a small store, at which every imaginable article of consumption apparently could be procured, especially whisky.

Victor Renaire pulled up his tired horse, which was one of the wiry little animals with sinews of steel, peculiar to California.

"Hallo, in there!" he yelled.

No response. It was just getting dusk, and there did not seem to be a living soul about the place.

"Confound that fellow!" muttered Victor, "he must be in there somewhere."

He picked up an apple that happened to be rolling about in the wagon, and threw it with all his force in the door.

Evidently it hit somebody inside, for there came rolling forth such a volley of oaths as made Garnett fairly shrink within herself.

A minute afterward a big, hulking fellow, with canvas pants stuffed inside his cowhide boots, and a face that looked as if it had never been washed since the Deluge, came strolling deliberately out of the store, and regarded Renaire and Garnett, and the horse and the wagon, with an air of lazy curiosity.

"Well, what d'ye want?" he asked at length, in a voice that sounded rusty from disuse.

"We want something to eat and drink, for the first thing," replied Victor.

"Well, I don't know whether you can have it or not," was the hospitable response.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what you want to eat and drink."

"What have you got?"

The man did not answer. He had apparently fallen into a doze, as he leaned against the door-post.

"I ask you what you have," repeated Victor. The man snored.

"You infernal fool," yelled Victor Renaire, in a perfect fury.

"Eh?" asked the man, waking up suddenly.

"Give us some bread and cheese and coffee," said Victor. "I suppose you can do that."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"All right. Where can we put the horse?" asked Victor.

"Take him 'round in the barn and hitch him up. You will find some feed in there."

Victor helped Garnett out of the wagon, and took her into the rather strong-smelling store, the owner moving just sufficiently to allow them to pass him in the doorway. Then Victor Renaire went to attend to the wants of his horse, leaving her alone.

As soon as Renaire was out of sight the lazy man seemed to change his character.

He looked quickly at Garnett, and, stepping inside, asked, in a tone altogether unlike his former drawl:

"What is your name?"

Garnett was so much taken aback by the unexpected question, asked in so earnest a manner, that for the moment she could not reply.

The man bent down and looked into her eyes with a kindly expression and repeated the question.

Garnett looked around to see if Victor Renaire was within hearing and replied, simply:

"Garnett!"

"What is your other name? Who is your father? The man that is with you?"

"No—oh, no," said Garnett, with a shiver.

"Where are you going, then?"

"To San Francisco."

"Do you live there?"

"Yes—no—yes. At least, I—I—I—"

"Garnett!" broke in Victor Renaire's harsh voice. "I think I told you to keep your mouth shut in strange places. It is not very becoming for a young girl to enter into conversation with every man she meets."

"But, Victor—"

"That will do. You have said enough," interrupted Victor Renaire. "Say, you. How soon can we have some supper?" he continued, addressing the storekeeper.

But that gentleman was once again, the sleepy, uncouth jayhawker, and he took no notice of Victor Renaire's snappish query.

"How about that bread and cheese and coffee?" asked Victor, once more.

"I guess they are all right."

The man moved sluggishly into an inner room. Victor and Garnett followed him, and then it appeared that his ability to serve up supper was much higher than he had confessed.

In five minutes Victor and Garnett were seated at a table eating ham and eggs and drinking good coffee, while their lazy host, who evidently lived by himself, walked around and kept them well supplied with coffee and other adjuncts of the meal.

"What time does the Santora stage pass here?" asked Victor, with his mouth full, after the first edge of his hunger had worn off.

"Eh?"

"When does the stage for Santora get here? The horses are changed here, are they not?"

"Yes."

"Well, when does it get here? We want to get to Santora as soon as possible."

"It don't come to-night."

"Wha-a-a-t?" yelled Victor.

"Will you have some more coffee?" asked the groceryman of Garnett, without noticing Victor Renaire's dismay.

"No, thank you," said Garnett. She was anxiously watching Victor Renaire's troubled face.

"What time in the morning does that stage go past?" asked Victor.

"Eh?"

The man seemed to take a mischievous delight in irritating the choleric little man.

"When does the stage arrive?"

"Ten o'clock in the morning," was the groceryman's curt reply.

"How long does it stay here?"

"Long enough to change the horses."

"What time does it reach Santora?"

"That depends."

"What does it depend on?"

"The speed of the horses and whether the driver is drunk or not. If he has much whisky aboard, it may not get to Santora at all."

"Well, we shall have to stay here all night, I suppose. Have you got any rooms where we can sleep?"

"I have one."

"Well, where is it?"

"Up-stairs."

"Show it to me."

"What for?"

"I want to see if it is comfortable enough for my daughter."

"It will have to be, because it is the only one I have. But you can see it if you like."

The two men went up-stairs to the second floor and looked into a small apartment with rough board walls and dusty rafters overhead. There was a bedstead and bed in one corner, two chairs, a table, and—that was all.

Victor Renaire walked over to the window and shook the casement.

"The window is nailed down, I see."

"Eh?"

"Idiot!" growled Victor, under his breath. Then he repeated aloud: "You have the window nailed down."

"Yes. Patent burglar-proof arrangement of my own," replied the man, with a chuckle.

The two descended to the lower room and Victor told Garnett to go to bed.

"Are we to stay here all night, Victor?" asked Garnett, timidly.

"Yes. Come along. I'll show you your room."

Victor Renaire led the young girl up-stairs and pointed to the room she was to occupy.

"You go in there and sleep and remember that I shall be within earshot."

With this warning, Victor locked her door on the outside and left the young girl to her reflections.

He went down-stairs and found his host leaning against the front door-post quietly smoking.

Victor took up his position on the other side of the doorway, lighted a cigar and puffed away in silence also.

Suddenly the grocery-keeper drawled out:

"What's your name?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked Victor, suspiciously.

"Nothing particular. Only I have something belonging to a certain party, and I thought you might be acquainted with him."

"What is it?"

"This," said the groceryman, drawing a small object from his pocket and holding it up in the full glare of the lamp.

Victor made a dart for it, but the groceryman pushed him back and replaced the article in his pocket.

It was the ebony box that Dr. Milton had taken with him from San Francisco!

"Where did you get that?" demanded Victor.

"Never mind. It is mine now," was the reply.

"I can prove that it is my property," yelled Victor.

"Oh, can you? Then if you will swear to that before a magistrate, you shall have it. It contains a plate for printing counterfeit notes, remember, and you say it is yours. Isn't that it?"

Victor Renaire saw that he was giving himself away, and he remained silent.

Then he said: "How did you get it?"

"That is my business."

"You won't tell me?"

"No," returned the storekeeper, as he shut and fastened the door and walked into the rear apartment.

He pointed to a lounge in one corner and told Victor he could sleep there. Then, without another word, he sauntered into the store, lay down behind the counter, and at once began to snore.

Victor stretched himself on the lounge and thought and thought.

How that man could have got the ebony box, when Dr. Milton took such care of it, he could not conceive, but of one thing he was determined—he would have it before he left that house.

He listened to the stentorian breathing of the man in the front store, and a fearful resolve took possession of his breast.

But he must wait until quite sure that the slumber of the groceryman was completely in possession of his faculties.

He waited one—two—hours!

Then he softly arose, removed his high-heeled boots, and with bowie-knife in hand, in case of necessity, stole catlike into the store.

He reached the counter and then stood still and listened.

The sleeper was snoring comfortably, and was no doubt far enough away in the land of dreams.

Round the counter crept the dwarf, until he could see the mighty form of the groceryman lying stretched on the floor with his feet toward Victor. One hand was loosely holding a six-shooter, the fingers relaxed and nerveless, and giving mute testimony to the unconsciousness of their owner.

The ebony box, Victor knew, was in his inside coat-pocket.

If he could get it out without waking the man, so much the better. If not, then—he had used a knife before, and could do so again!

He crept carefully along by the side of the re-cumbent figure, bent down, and the man moved slightly and tightened his grip on his revolver, but without opening his eyes.

Victor involuntarily raised his knife, holding the point of the glittering blade just over the heart of the sleeper. Then he placed his hand inside the man's coat. He could feel the ebony box sticking out of the pocket.

He tried to pull it out. It came a little way—now, another drag, and—

"Ha! Thief!" yelled the groceryman, as he opened his eyes and tried to point his revolver at Victor.

The dwarf held his hand down, and at the same time struck at the other's heart with his knife with all his force

The knife cut the coat and drew blood from the breast of his victim, and then—

Two hands clasped his right arm with a grip of despair, and Victor saw the white and terrified face of Garnett at his side!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE KING OF TERRORS AT MIDNIGHT.

The scene shifts to the house of Dr. Milton in San Francisco.

Pauline and her aunt are sitting in the parlor in the bright morning sunlight.

The elder lady is busy with her needle, and the young one sits at the organ, toying with the ivory keys and occasionally drawing from them little bursts of harmony—now grave, now gay, as the humor strikes her. She has just finished a mighty clashing of thunderous chords from Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" when her aunt's voice interrupts her musical reverie.

"Pauline, have you seen anything of that funny little dwarf, Victor Renaire, since the day he made you an offer of marriage and then left the house so abruptly?"

"No, aunt," returned Pauline, turning pale and shuddering, as she thought of her interview with Victor. "I have not, and I trust I never may again."

"It is rather strange that he has not renewed his offer. I wonder what is the nature of the power he holds over your father. It is a puzzle to me altogether."

"I am sure I don't know, aunt. If I had not seen the letter in my father's own writing I should not have believed a word the little wretch said. As it is—"

"Perhaps the letter was a forgery."

Pauline started.

That was something she had never thought of before. And yet—and yet—it was possible that her aunt had hit upon the true solution of the problem.

That excellent lady was not often guilty of entertaining brilliant ideas, but it really seemed in this case as if she might have stumbled on one accidentally in the course of her mental groping.

A ring at the front door-bell, and an announcement by the servant that a gentleman wished to see Miss Milton.

What was his name?

He had not told the servant his name, but he would not detain the lady very long.

"Show him in."

A tall, well-proportioned man, with bronzed face and military bearing, stepped into the parlor, and bowed to the two ladies with natural grace.

"I know it may seem strange to you, Miss Milton, that I, who am entirely unknown to you, should speak of your private affairs, but I beg that you will hear me out before you pass judgment upon my behavior."

Pauline bowed, and looked bewildered.

"In the first place, Miss Milton, you had an offer of marriage a few days ago."

"Sir, I—"

"Exactly. You think I am impudent, but I am not. I will explain. You had an offer of marriage from a little, white-haired, white-livered, scrawny, monkey-faced, scoundrelly blackguard, and his name is Jacques Renaire!"

The gentleman rolled out the complimentary adjectives leading up to Victor Renaire's name with an unction indicative of his disgust for the dwarf that was truly refreshing.

"You see I know the man," he continued. "I also know that he produced a letter from your father, Doctor Milton, by which he hoped to influence your decision in his favor. Am I not right so far?"

"Yes," said Pauline, wonderingly. "Your information is correct. But what have you to do with all this?"

"In the first place, I have a score to settle with Victor Renaire for some past transactions of his, and, secondly, I feel that it is my duty to save an estimable young lady from a terrible fate. Your mother—"

"What of her?" hastily interposed Pauline.

"Do you know anything of her fate? My brother, Ralph, talks in a mysterious way about having seen her lately, but I am sure he must be mistaken."

"That is further along. What I know I cannot divulge to you just now. Suffice it to say that I hold cards which it will take all Victor Renaire's best playing to beat. He will find himself mightily in the wrong if he thinks he can play a double game with me."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Simply this: when Victor Renaire comes again, as he surely will, to renew his proposal, just let me know, so that I can take part in the interview. I may help you a little, and I don't think I shall do any harm. Will you do this?"

"How am I to find you?"

"Have you a telephone?"

"Yes."

"Well, here is my address," handing a card to Pauline. "You see it is very near to you. Just call me up by telephone then, and I will be with you in less than five minutes."

"I see by this card that your name is—"

"Brown, Walter Brown. Yes, that is right."

"Mr. Brown, can you not come and see my father? I expect him home to-morrow."

"Well, no. I do not wish to be seen around this house more than I can help until the time comes to act. Those Renaires are a shrewd gang, and might drop onto my business before we know where we are. Good-evening, ladies."

"You are sure to be at home when I telephone you, I suppose," said Pauline.

"Yes. I shall be there. Do not fear."

"Good-by, Mr. Brown."

"Good-by, Miss Milton. Good-evening," he added to the aunt who arose and bowed impressively.

He turned to go out of the room, when Pauline held out her hand.

Mr. Brown turned, saw the hand, and taking it carefully, shook it as if he were afraid of breaking the young lady's wrist.

"Good-evening, Miss Milton."

"Good-by," Mr. Brown.

And he was gone.

"What a very nice gentleman," was Pauline's comment as soon as the door closed.

"Yes, he is a very well-behaved person," was her aunt's guarded reply.

"I think he is the nicest man I ever met. He is one of Nature's noblemen," said Pauline, enthusiastically.

"Um!" said her aunt, as she bent over her sewing.

"He seems to know all about the Renaires. I wonder who he can be. Perhaps my father will know. I wish he would return."

"Yes. It seems a long while since he was with us. And Ralph, too. I miss him very much. He is a very good boy," said her aunt.

"Listen, aunt, what is that? Can it be—yes it is. Father!"

"Why, my daughter, how are you?" said Doctor Milton, as he burst open the door and took Pauline to his arms.

"Oh, father, I am so glad that you have come. But where is Ralph?"

"Oh, he will be here to-morrow. He is staying behind to attend to some business."

"I have just had a visitor—a strange gentleman. I wish you had been here a few minutes ago. You would then have seen him. He spoke to me about—about—Mr. Renaire."

"Well, what of him?" asked Doctor Milton, frowning. "What have you to do with him?"

"He—he wants me to marry him, and he produced a letter in your handwriting, commanding me to consent."

"The infernal little humpbacked villain!" said Doctor Milton. "So he has added forgery to his other crimes, has he? Well, never mind, Pauline. I will attend to him. You go to bed, my child. You are tired and it is very late."

Always accustomed to yield implicit obedience to her father, Pauline made a sign to her aunt, and the two soon after retired and left Doctor Milton alone.

He sat quite still for a long time after they had departed, apparently lost in thought.

"So," he muttered, "Victor Renaire would strike me through the person I love best in all the world. He would force from me my little girl—my Pauline, and make her his wife—his slave."

He got up and paced the room in his agony of spirit.

"I told Pauline the letter was a forgery. Would that it were. The little brute! He has me every way. The ebony box and the plate lost, what mercy can I expect from him? He will have his own way, and then—crush me! Ha! What's that?"

The door of the room slowly opened, and a white-robed figure stood in the opening!

Doctor Milton started in horror, and then, recovering himself by a great effort, laughed quietly:

"Pshaw! Another somnambulistic attack. She would have frightened Pauline if she had happened to meet her on the stairs."

He walked over to the white-robed figure and led her gently up-stairs to a bedroom at the top of the house—in fact, the same one occupied by Ralph when at home.

A lamp was burning on the table, and cast a feeble glimmer over the apartment.

As soon as the two reached the room, Doctor Milton gently shook the sleeper and awoke her.

"Gracious! Where am I?" was the first exclamation as she looked around in a bewildered manner. "Oh, yes, I remember now," she added as she looked at Doctor Milton. "I suppose I have been asleep."

"Yes, you have, and you have also been walking all over the house. You had better keep quiet. You don't want to be seen until the morning, I suppose, do you?"

"No. But I shall demand to see that paper then, or—you know what I shall do."

"Yes; I know. Good-night."

He went down-stairs to the parlor again, and sat still, thinking—thinking—thinking!

Where did the ebony box go? That was what worried him. It was in his pocket when he reached Pinewood, of that he was certain. After that he knew nothing about it. How would he meet Victor Renaire? He knew the vindictive nature of that worthy too well to doubt that he

would use to the utmost the power he held over him. Another thing he could not understand, was the absence of his son Ralph. He had disappeared so mysteriously and with such an apparent want of adequate motive, that he was puzzled. As for the Garnett episode, he did not pay much attention to that. Perhaps he was so much occupied with his own personal affairs that he had no time to spare for those that more nearly concerned his son.

"There is one thing," he reflected. "Ralph has plenty of money with him and can take care of himself."

He walked out of the parlor and made his way through the back yard to the stable.

His horses recognized him with gentle whinnying, and seemed as if they were heartily glad to see him again.

"Ah, my beauties," he said, "I don't know when we shall have another spin. I don't seem to have much heart for anything now. I have more to worry me now than for a long time. It is no use my staying here with you. I have no good news for you and so I may as well go in and try to get some sleep."

He extinguished the light in the stable lantern and made his way back to the house.

He fastened the doors and went up-stairs to his bedroom. He looked at himself in the looking-glass and there he saw the tall, gentlemanly, smooth-faced man, with the clerical cast of countenance, who had so often inspired confidence in the hearts of his patients when he practiced medicine in the days gone by.

"It would have been better for all if I had never left it, perhaps," he muttered. "A physician is generally respected, at least, though often undeservedly."

He laughed a cynical little laugh.

Then he threw himself wearily upon the bed.

A French clock that stood upon the mantelpiece rung out the hour of twelve—the silvery strokes giving warning that another day had been gathered up by the hand of Time to be hidden away until the last roll-call.

Dr. Milton tossed about uneasily for an hour, and then fell into a slumber.

Suddenly he started up, with the blood rushing tumultuously through his veins and his heart beating like a mighty steam-engine. A cold perspiration stood upon his brow, and he shook as if he had the palsy.

What had disturbed him?

Had he heard a fearful cry, like that of a lost soul plunged into a fiery lake, or had he dreamed the horror?

"Henry! Ralph! Save me!"

No doubt about it this time! The cry was maniacal in its intensity, and came from the room of the woman whom he had led up-stairs in her sleep.

He quickly made his way to the landing outside, and there he met Pauline and her aunt in their night-robés, and trembling with fear.

"What is it, father? It sounded like my dead mother's voice!" said Pauline, in an ecstasy of terror.

"I don't know what it is, Pauline, but I will soon see. You go to bed. You will catch cold," replied Dr. Milton.

He ran up-stairs to the room from whence the cry had proceeded, but in which an ominous silence now prevailed. Pushing open the door, he saw that the white-robed figure was lying quite still upon the bed.

With professional coolness, he felt the pulse and heart.

What was that he muttered to himself? Could it be possible that he said: "This saves me a lot of trouble?"

Pauline had followed him up-stairs, and now, with a loud shriek, threw herself upon the figure lying so still, crying:

"Oh, mother! mother!"

"What is it?" said Aunt Susie, with a white face.

"It is Madame Ponoisi, and she is quite dead—heart disease!" said Dr. Milton, quietly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BEATING A FULL HAND.

WE must go back to the scene of the attack on the train, before the events narrated in the last chapter.

When Sleepless Eye and his faithful friend, Colonel Blunt, met so unexpectedly in the Express car, they did not stop to utter many congratulations. There was work to do.

Colonel Blunt was a little stiff from the effect of his bonds, but he shook himself together, and taking a Winchester rifle from a secret hiding-place behind the heavy iron safe, leaped to the door of the car, ready to defend his charge with his life.

"This was the secret service you were detailed on, was it?" asked Sleepless Eye.

"Yes. This money had to go to San Francisco, and they would not trust the regular agent. There were rumors that the Angel Camp gang might attack the train, but I did not believe them, or I would have taken help along."

"Ah, colonel, you should never take chances."

"I never will again."

During this short colloquy the battle raged outside with unabated ferocity.

The arrival of the locomotive with assistance had given the train-party added courage, and had made the robbers proportionately desperate. The encounter had already borne bloody fruits, and disabled men could be seen here and there, crawling into the bushes to bind up their wounds or breathe their last, away from the immediate scene of strife.

It was the most desperate encounter that had ever taken place on the line of that railroad.

"I had better stay with you, colonel," said Sleepless Eye, as he listened to the shots and cries. "Those fellows will be back again, and you may need help."

"That's so. They think they have me cooped up, helpless, like a rat in a trap. They will be rather surprised when they find that my teeth are long and sharp enough to bite through the wires," responded Blunt, patting the barrel of his rifle affectionately.

Sleepless Eye did not answer. He was cautiously looking out at the corner of the small iron-barred window.

He drew his head away suddenly as a rifle-ball shattered the glass and passed through the opposite side of the car.

"I wonder whether that was done purposely or accidentally," he muttered, with a comical smile playing around the corners of his resolute mouth. "The air is full of shots out there. I never saw anything to equal that Angel Camp gang. They are the hardest set of men west of the Rockies."

"They will get pretty well wiped out this trip though, or I am a fish," said Colonel Blunt, as he examined the cartridges in his Winchester and stood ready for anything in the way of fighting that might demand his attention.

Sleepless Eye was again at the corner of the little window.

"Look out, colonel. Here comes that white-headed dwarf again, to settle your business."

"I will shoot him dead as he enters," said Blunt, bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

"No, don't. I have a better plan."

"What is it?"

"Lie down where he left you. I will fix the ropes so that you will appear to be tied. Let him ask you about the safe. You pretend you are going to give him the combination. Then ply him with questions about that counterfeiting crib of his in Frisco. Pretend you know all about it, and are willing to work with him."

"That's all right, if he does not shoot me first thing," said the colonel, doubtfully.

"I will attend to that. I will hide behind the safe and have him covered with my gun. I will prevent his hurting you," replied Sleepless Eye.

"Go ahead, then."

"Lie down, and be quick, or he will be here before we are ready."

In a twinkling Colonel Blunt was on the floor, with the ropes carefully disposed about his limbs and body, and no one could have seen that he was not as securely bound as when the dwarf had left him a short time before.

Sleepless Eye had just time enough to hide behind the safe when Jacques Renaire stepped into the car and cast a vindictive glance at Colonel Blunt's prostrate figure.

"Well, are you ready to pass in your checks, young fellow?" asked the dwarf, holding his six-shooter carefully, with the muzzle pointing at Blunt's head.

Colonel Blunt's only answer was a groan.

"Why don't you speak?" said Jacques, giving the other a slight kick.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Whether you will or will not give me the combination of that safe," hissed Jacques. "I intend to get into it anyhow, but it would be easier to turn the handle than to use a sledge-hammer, that is all."

"I dare not give it to you," said Blunt.

The dwarf leveled his pistol as if to shoot, but changed his mind and dropped it again.

He thought he was sparing the life of the man at his feet, but if he had known what a narrow escape he had had from Sleepless Eye's weapon he would have had a much better appreciation of the chances of life and death than he evidently possessed.

"Now, I have no time to lose," said Jacques, desperately. "For the last time will you give me the combination?"

"If I refuse?"

"This!" said Jacques, once more leveling his pistol, as the sound of the contest out in the night drew closer to the car.

"Well, it is—" commenced Blunt, slowly, as if he had half forgotten the magic letters that would cause the heavy iron door to swing open.

"Yes," said Jacques, eagerly, bending down to catch the accents of the speaker as soon as the words left his lips.

"It is—"

"Well?"

"What shall I get if I tell you?" went on Blunt, with aggravating coolness.

"Your life. Is not that enough?"

"What value will that be to me, even if you spare it? Do you think the Express Company will let me enjoy it when they find out that I helped you to crack the safe? Not much. They will put me comfortably away in State Prison

for fifteen or twenty years, and I might as well be dead as there."

"Why will they do that?"

"They will swear that I belonged to your gang and that the whole thing was a put-up job."

"Um! Well?" said Jacques.

"Give me my share of the swag and let me into that flash money-making concern of yours in Frisco—"

Jacques started back as if stung.

"You are crazy," he said, his face turning as white as his hair.

Sleepless Eye laughed noiselessly and leaned forward so far that he could have touched the dwarf, who was staring with wide-open eyes into Colonel Blunt's face.

"Not so crazy as you think, perhaps," returned the latter. "Come, now, I offer you a fair thing. You need not be afraid of me. If I had wanted to give you away I could have done it long ago, but I do not believe in making enemies for nothing. I would have got some reward from the Government, I know, but the police who would have worked up the case on my information would have got most of it. Besides, I am not in the detective business, anyhow."

"You need not tell me that!" said Jacques. "You are not smart enough to take care of yourself, even, let alone catching crooks."

Sleepless Eye smiled grimly from his place of concealment.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Blunt.

"That you are a fool," suddenly yelled Jacques. "My crib in Frisco is my own, and I don't want any partner—certainly not an idiot like you. If I had been in your place in this car there would not be any ten men who could have laid me out as I have you. If you cannot even take care of an Express car, with the law and everything else to back you up, what do you suppose you could do in my crib, where I have to be on the everlasting watch to keep the officers off the track? Why, I have enough bogus money in the cellar of my house there to flood the whole state of California. You see I am giving it away to you because dead men tell no tales, and you are so near being dead that we can count you as already defunct. I am going to kill you right here, and get into the safe by main strength. I am only sorry I have given so much time to a fool."

"Don't you think you are a coward?" asked Blunt contemptuously.

The dwarf's answer was to point his heavy pistol full at Blunt's head.

Bang, rung out a report that shook the car.

But it was not Renaire's weapon that made the noise.

Before he could pull the trigger, Sleepless Eye had fired straight at the dwarf's pistol and knocked it out of his hand.

At the same moment Blunt sprung to his feet, and with a well-directed blow of his fist sent the little man sprawling on the floor.

"You little viper, it is my turn now," said Blunt, as he picked up Jacques Renaire's pistol and, with Sleepless Eye by his side, looked down at the discomfited dwarf.

"You can't most always tell, can you, Jacques?" put in Sleepless Eye. "You thought you had the game in your own hands, and here I hold four aces. I guess you are gone up now."

"Let us hope so," said the colonel.

"Blunt, shut that door and fasten it as well as you can," said Sleepless Eye. "I'll put these cords around our little friend here and make sure of him. He is a pretty good capture, and I guess we are not needed outside. It looks as if the Angel Camp boys are about cleaned out."

"What is your price to let me go?" said Jacques, sullenly.

"Well, darn your ugly picture," said Sleepless Eye, indignantly. "So you think we can be bought, do you?"

"Every man has his price," was the response, with an air of dogged conviction.

"You are a liar," said Blunt. "You judge everybody by your own mean standard, and it will be the ruin of you."

"Never mind arguing with him, colonel," said Sleepless Eye, impatiently. "Have you got that door fixed?"

"Not yet. It is smashed nearly all to pieces."

"Barricade it with those iron chests and boxes," said Sleepless Eye. "We must make this place secure somehow."

"All right."

"Here, I will give you a hand," added Sleepless Eye, as he tied the last knot in the cords he had twisted around the dwarf's limbs. "I don't think Jacques Renaire will trouble me until I let him loose."

The dwarf said nothing, but if looks could kill Sleepless Eye would have certainly dropped dead at that instant.

Sleepless Eye and Colonel Blunt went to work with a will at securing the door. The shattered boards were fastened across the opening and massive boxes and iron chests piled against them. Half-way up an opening large enough for a man to crawl through was left.

"Now, one more chest on top of the heap and

she will be safe," said Sleepless Eye. "Here is the one we want at the other end of the car, colonel."

The two men walked over to the chest referred to, looking down in a satisfied manner at the dwarf as they passed him.

The latter lay quite still, with his eyes shut, as if resigned to his fate.

Sleepless Eye and Colonel Blunt took hold of the heavy iron chest and tried to move it from its position in the corner.

"Heavier than I should have thought," said Sleepless Eye, as the two tugged at it without effect.

"Terrible," said the colonel.

"What is the matter with it?"

"Be hanged if I know."

"Anybody would think it was screwed down to the floor."

Colonel Blunt burst into a loud laugh.

"What the deuce are you laughing at?" asked Sleepless Eye, impatiently. "I don't see any fun in this."

"That's a fact, captain," returned Blunt; "but I forgot to tell you that the chest is screwed down. I did it myself, too, before we started. It is full of specie and it is screwed down for greater safety."

"Well, get a screw-driver, and we'll unfasten it. We shall have to use it," said Sleepless Eye.

"All right," said the colonel.

He turned half-way round, when—crash! a heavy blow fell on his head and he dropped at Sleepless Eye's feet, senseless.

At the same instant a handful of dust was thrown full in Sleepless Eye's face, blinding him momentarily.

He could just distinguish the shriveled figure of Jacques Renaire climbing through the opening in the doorway referred to above, and heard his mocking laugh of triumph as he disappeared from view.

Sleepless Eye darted toward him, but ere he could reach the door there was a loud report and an upheaval of the floor where the dwarf had been lying. Then a spiral column of fire arose, filling the whole width of the car, completely cutting off the Sleepless Eye's passage to the door.

"The fiends! They have exploded a torpedo under the car and set it on fire," yelled Sleepless Eye. "Blunt! Blunt!" he screamed, in his companion's ear. "Wake up! Wake up! Danger! Danger, I tell you!"

But Colonel Blunt lay senseless, while the fierce tongues of flame encircled him and Sleepless Eye and hungered for their lives.

Sleepless Eye distinguished the demoniac laughter of Jacques Renaire and then fell in a swoon beside his companion to share with him a horrible death.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE BURNING CAR.

WHILE Sleepless Eye, Colonel Blunt and Jacques Renaire were in the car there were some exciting scenes on the track.

The Angel Camp gang thoroughly realized that if they were captured they would never get out of prison alive. A long list of crimes was marked against every one.

It was this reflection that gave added strength to the arm of each man. Courage they all possessed. The wild, lawless lives they led would have been out of the question for cowards.

The locomotive, with its freight of quiet, resolute men, who, we already know, were secretly clustered around it, with weapons ready for action, backed down into the midst of the gang.

Terror seized the robbers. Not personal terror! They were too used to bloodshed and hair-breadth escapes to fear for themselves in the way of bodily injury.

Their fear was that they might be captured and forced into the gloomy cells of St. Quentin prison, where nothing but the memory of their free life on mountain and plain would remain to them.

A dozen men, with rifles ready, sprung from the locomotive and moved slowly toward the Express car, keeping the muzzles of their weapons pointed at the robbers.

The latter saw the aim of the other party and determined to frustrate it.

Ed Ralston, who, in his red shirt, large slouch hat, and high boots, looked weirdly picturesque in the dim light, was in command of the gang, and at once drew them up in a body on the other side of the train from which the opposing force stood.

"Now, boys," he said, as the last one made his way between and under the cars a few hundred yards from the enemy, "as they pass along toward the Express car, you blaze away at them. We can get that swag yet if we try very hard. There are not as many of those fellows as I expected."

The train party evidently suspected a sly move of some kind from Ed Ralston and his gang, for they did not pass straight along toward the Express car, as was apparently their first intention.

Sleepless Eye, as we already know, was in the

car, with Jacques Renaire lying bound at his feet.

The train party made a wide *detour*, keeping as much as possible out of the light cast from the car windows.

Several shots had been exchanged, with bloody effect, as already noted, and now there was a temporary lull as each side strove to get the other in a disadvantageous position.

Cautiously the train party worked around toward the Express car, the robbers trying in vain to distinguish their movements in the gloom.

"There they are. See. By that clump of bushes," said Edward Ralston, excitedly. "Fire!"

From the guns of the robbers belched a volume of fire and smoke.

There was a single scream of agony which told that the volley had not been without effect.

"Hit somebody, anyhow," said Edward Ralston, in satisfied tones.

"You did well, but do not get too confident. There will be more officers down here soon. The best thing you can do is to get out as quickly as possible. The scheme was given away, and there is nothing to be made by staying here."

The speaker was a tall, clean-shaven, gentlemanly-looking individual referred to in a previous chapter.

"That is all very well, Cap," replied Edward Ralston, "but how are we to get away? Our horses are over there. Besides, we could not get down the mountain on this side. We have got to fight our way through that crowd, anyhow, and we may as well take a whack at the Express car while we are about it."

"I tell you the Express car is too well guarded," said the other, impatiently. "If you save yourselves you will be lucky."

"So you will, that is truth fresh from the well," said a croaking voice that could only belong to Jacques Renaire.

The clean-shaven gentleman started, and a dangerous gleam sprung into his dark eyes as he heard the tones.

"The whole thing is blown, and I came as near passing in my checks as I ever did in my life," continued Jacques, as he emerged from beneath a car whither he had made his way, on escaping through the half-barricaded doorway of the Express car.

The clean-shaven gentleman made a hasty movement as if he would have seized the dwarf by the throat.

Jacques saw it and stepped back.

"Keep cool," he hissed in the other's ear. "This is no time to wake up an old grudge."

"You are right," returned the clean-shaven gentleman. "We will let the matter rest now, but you and I will have a settlement before we are many days older."

"At your service," was the mocking response.

"Look out, boys! Here they are!" cried Ralston, at this juncture.

At the same moment the cracking of pistols and shouts of the opposing force sounded within a few yards of them.

The train party had managed to reach the other side of the train unobserved, and were right upon them.

The Angel Camp gang saw that their only chance was in a sortie.

Led by Ed Ralston and the dwarf they climbed on the platform of the cars and jumped down on the other side.

Right in the midst of the foe came the gang, firing their pistols right and left.

Three of the robbers were lost in the first wild rush. Then the strife developed into regular carnage.

Pistols were thrown away or clubbed, while the keen bowie-knife was brought into murderous play.

The dwarf, owing to his insignificant size, escaped to a large extent the attention bestowed on larger foes.

It was not long, however, before the train party realized that the impish creature, with his white hair and cruel black eyes, was doing more damage than any other member of the gang.

Armed with a long knife, sharpened to a razor-like keenness, the dwarf cut and slashed away like a fiend incarnate.

One, two, three of the train party shrieked and rolled over in agony, with the life-blood gurgling from gaping wounds, and dyeing a deeper crimson the red woolen shirts they wore.

They had not seen the hand that slew them!

The clean-shaven man took part in the first charge on the train party, and then quietly retreated to the opposite side of the train, eventually making his way to the car where Madame Ponoisi lay back in a scat, pale and trembling, but not uttering a word of terror.

"Kill that white-headed little wretch!" yelled the leader of the train party, as he seized Ed Ralston's uplifted right arm, and was himself held in the same way by his opponent.

The dwarf chuckled, and making one vindictive lunge at the back of the speaker, which, however, missed its mark, and only cut his cartridge-belt in two, disappeared in the mysterious manner which was one of his chief characteristics.

"Break!" suddenly yelled Ralston, as he tore himself away from the grasp of the man who held his arm, and started for the bush.

Before the train party knew what the gang had done, the latter were out of sight and all was as quiet as if there had been no deadly combat on the spot a minute before.

Only the stark faces of the dead as they lay in the half-light from the cars reminded the living of the scene through which they had just passed.

"After them, boys!" cried the leader of the train party, who was the first to recover from his surprise at this unexpected maneuver.

The party needed no second bidding.

Hastily picking up the rifles which had been dropped when the hand to hand combat commenced, the men started eagerly for the thicket that lined the railroad, firing as they went.

There was no answer from the bush.

Whether the shots had told no one knew. If anybody was hit he gave no sign, and for anything the train party could tell, the robbers might have got miles away by this time.

"Follow them up. They cannot have got very far. Remember, there is five hundred dollars reward for each, dead or alive."

"Well, we have got some of them dead, at all events," remarked one, looking down at the dead robbers who lay in a heap, with those of the train party who had succumbed to pistol-shots and the dwarf's treacherous knife.

"Hurry, men, and we can soon get some more. Look out for an ambush," said the leader, as he rushed up the embankment and forced his way through the underbrush.

He was closely followed by his men.

Not a sound or sign of the robbers!

"Ah! here is where they had their horses," said the leader, as he came upon a spot where the torn-up earth and trampled grass showed that horse's hoofs had been moving back and forth restlessly.

Stooping down with his ear to the ground, he could distinguish the sound of horses at a gallop.

"They are gone," he said, with a disappointed air. "That settles the reward as far as they are concerned."

"Hello! What is that light over there?" said one of the men who had been leaning carelessly on his rifle while the leader was speaking.

"Where?"

"It is on the railroad."

"Impossible! There is nothing there to make that much light."

"It cannot be anywhere else!"

"Why?"

"Because there is a cliff on the other side of the track, and we know it is not on this side," said the first speaker.

The light to which he had referred was a red glare just distinguishable through the pines and was evidently, as he had declared, on the railroad track.

"Some work of that gang," said the leader. "They must have set fire to the train before they retreated."

The party had walked a considerable distance from the track in pursuit of the robbers, and were in the midst of a wood which prevented their seeing the light as plainly as they would otherwise.

"Come, men, let's hurry back," said the leader. "Remember that there are women and children in that train. We cannot let them be roasted alive."

Simultaneously every man in the party turned and walked with rapid strides toward the railroad.

Before they had gone a dozen yards a loud report rent the air, and a shower of sparks sprung high above the tree-tops.

"The fiends! They are using dynamite," said the leader.

"No. I think you are mistaken. I guess that was only a torpedo on the track, probably exploded accidentally," said another.

"This is not the kind of time for accidents of that sort," was the significant reply. "Besides how could the torpedo explode unless wheels had passed over it, and we know that the train is not moving."

The reader knows that the explosion was under the Express car, and that it was the work of Jacques Renaire.

As soon as he disappeared from the melee after trying to stab the leader of the train party in the back, the dwarf made his way quickly back to the Express car.

He had no definite plan of action, but was bent on revenge with the full force of his vindictive nature.

"Curse them!" he muttered. "Sleepless Eye and his pal sha'n't bother me any more."

He clutched his knife tightly with his long, cruel fingers, and crept cautiously toward the door of the Express car.

"If I could only get one lunge at his heart I should be satisfied. But that is impossible. He has his gun and would get the drop on me long before I could reach him."

He stood for a moment undecided.

"Ha! What is in that can?" he said as he caught sight of an object on the track—or rather, by the side of it—which seemed to Jacques to be sent specially for his use.

It was a can of blasting powder!

The dwarf pounced upon it and carried it to the Express car putting it underneath the very

middle of the floor. Then he opened it carefully and taking out sufficient powder to lay a train, lighted a short fuse which he had found by the side of the can, put one end in the powder and ran for the bush.

Just in time!

He was just concealed in the shrubbery when the report took place.

The passengers, who had been trembling in the other cars during the fighting, save a few of the men who had, unnoticed, joined the train party in the melee, started to the doors of the cars and rushed to the outer air, crazy with fear.

The Express car was on fire!

"Was anybody inside?" was the question that passed from lip to lip.

An unearthly shriek from the center of the flaming car was the answer in unmistakable language.

At the same moment the train party made their appearance.

"There is a man in the Express car," shouted a dozen voices.

"Come, men, we must get him out somehow," said the leader, as he rushed toward the fire.

Jacques looked out from his concealment, and laughed with devilish malignity.

"I should like to know how they will do it," he croaked. "I think I have settled Sleepless Eye this time."

The train party made an attempt to reach the door of the car, but were twice driven back by the fierce heat.

"It is no use. Nothing can save him," said the leader, after the second repulse. "He must be dead before this."

The leader was wrong.

Sleepless Eye and Colonel Blunt were both lying, smoke-begrimed and exhausted, but otherwise unhurt, on the track at a safe distance from the burning car.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW A QUIET SMOKE WAS DISTURBED.

"WELL, colonel," Sleepless Eye was saying, "we had a close call that time. I can hardly tell now how we got out."

"How was it?" asked Colonel Blunt, in a faint voice.

"Why, you see, the floor was pretty well burned through from below, and when I chopped at it with the ax there was not much resistance, and I soon made a hole big enough to get through and drag you along with me."

"You have saved my life, Sleepless Eye."

"Of course. That is a little thing we have done for each other several times since we have worked together."

"The old Express car is gone up," said Blunt, looking toward the blaze.

"Yes. They will save the rest of the train, though. They got the car uncoupled just in time."

"Don't see how they managed to do it. The heat must be terrible," responded the colonel.

"Well, this settles all the specie you were taking such care of, I suppose," said Sleepless Eye; "but they can't blame you."

"I don't know that it settles it. The safe and those chests are supposed to be fire-proof. We will go over there and take a look when they cool off, and when we both feel strong enough to move. For my part, I am pretty sick; that crack on the skull has made my head feel badly. It is bleeding a little too, I believe," added Blunt, as he put his hand to the back of his head and withdrew it with slight bloodstains on the fingers. "Look at it, Sleepless Eye."

The latter did as requested, and pronounced the wound a trifling one.

"Just keep your hat on, and it will be all right in a day or two."

"Hallo! there goes the train," said Blunt. "This is a nice place to be left."

"That's a fact. The whole crowd have got aboard and gone on. They have made up their minds that we are wiped out, that the Express car is burned up, and that there is nothing else to wait for," said Sleepless Eye, rather bitterly.

"They have taken the precaution to put red lanterns on each end. They will telegraph for help as soon as they can find an operator, of course. Snaggs's Bottom Station is all in darkness, and there is no chance to use the wires there," said Blunt. "Wonder if there is likely to be another train along here before morning breaks?"

"No," replied Sleepless Eye, decisively. "There is a Freight due about eight o'clock and an Express at half-past ten. Edgeview is seven miles from here, and we had better walk there and get some breakfast. We have plenty of work before us, and need all the strength we can get."

"But the Express car and the specie. We cannot leave that."

"Guess you are right, colonel. I should like to have gone to Edgeview for more reasons than one, but I shall have to stay and see you through with your charge. By the way, how are you fixed for weapons? Got your gun with you?"

"Yes. Here it is," said Blunt, pulling his

ponderous six-shooter from its leather case and examining the chambers. "I have plenty of cartridges, too. How are you heeled, Sleepless Eye?"

"Knife and gun," was the reply. "I hate to lose my rifle. But I suppose it is nothing but a piece of charred iron by this time," he added, sorrowfully. "Strange how a fellow gets attached to a weapon."

By this time the red lights on the last car of the train were just disappearing around a curve. The two men sitting on the ground felt that they were indeed alone, and if they had been inclined to take a somber view of things, generally, might have moralized about the heartless way in which men will leave their companions to their fate and look only to their own comfort and convenience.

But neither Sleepless Eye nor Colonel Blunt were philosophers of that stamp. They had all their lives been accustomed to hardship, peril and turmoil. As Sleepless Eye had said, they had each had opportunities of saving each other's lives more than once, which in itself was evidence that they had both been in situations of mortal danger often enough to deprive the approach of death of the charm of novelty.

Therefore, when they saw that the train had gone on its journey, leaving them in the midst of a wood, and with the precipitous sides of a mountain mocking their desire to reach the valley below, they simply looked around to make the best of their condition, with the hope of succor in the morning.

"It is getting pretty cold, Sleepless Eye," said the colonel, with a shiver. "Suppose we get over toward the car. The fire has done damage enough. We might as well make it do a little good now, by staving off the rheumatics."

"It would be dangerous," said Sleepless Eye.

"Dangerous?"

"That's what I said."

"Why?"

"Can't you see?"

"Darned if I can."

"It is plain enough."

"Why don't you speak right out, Sleepless Eye? What danger can come to us by warming ourselves at the fire? It seems to me there is more danger in lying on this damp ground, with the fog working through us to the very marrow of our bones. I am all cramped now. Being tied up with those ropes in the car, did not help me much. Then that crack on the head, and this lying out on the ground in the damp. Let me ever get my fingers on that Jacques Renaire again," added the colonel, with sudden ferocity, "and I'll choke him to death slowly—slowly, looking straight into his eyes the while. I'll let him know that Jack Blunt is wiping him out, and I'll do it—I'll do it, as sure as I'm sitting here."

"Hold on, colonel," put in Sleepless Eye, coolly. "Don't get excited! You shall have your fingers on him in due time, but it is no use to get hot about it just now. He is not here."

"Well, never mind about that," said Blunt. "What danger would there be in going over to that car to warm ourselves?"

"What about the gang?"

"What gang?"

"Angel Camp."

"They are far enough away by this time."

"How do you know?"

"Did not the train party chase them clear into the woods? You told me so yourself. I was laid out too flat to know anything about it. But you said you saw them go, and heard one of the train party say that they had ridden right away."

"But couldn't they easily come back?" suggested Sleepless Eye.

"What for?"

"How much money is there in that safe and the iron chests?"

Colonel Blunt gave a long whistle.

"That bang on the head must have thinned out my brains," he said.

"I should think so," was Sleepless Eye's uncomplimentary retort.

"Well, it was a pretty hard knock."

"Now," went on Sleepless Eye, returning to the original subject. "I know the Angel Camp boys, and I know Ed Ralston, and I am quite certain that they will not let this thing slip through their fingers without a struggle."

"You think they will come back?"

"I know they will."

"Well, let them come," said Colonel Blunt. "If we only had a rifle apiece, we could make cover and pick them off one by one. We should get as much for them dead as alive, anyhow."

"Yes, and if we go over to that car and stand in the light of the fire, they can pick us off one by one; and they will do it, too."

"All right, captain," said Blunt resignedly. "You are the boss."

"Well, can't you see how it would be? I only want to do the best thing for both of us," said Sleepless Eye somewhat irritably.

"Yes, it's all right, but I am freezing to death. I believe I would as soon be shot as lie over here another half-hour," was Blunt's doleful reply.

"Come on," said Sleepless Eye, rising. "It

is no use arguing with you. We will go over and get warm. But if either or both of us get shot, it won't be my fault, mind that."

"All right, Cap, you are excused," said Colonel Blunt, laughing. "Gosh! I can hardly get up," he continued, as his stiffened limbs refused to support him. "Give me your hand, Sleepless Eye. You see whether I need a fire or not."

"By gracious, you are worse than I thought!" said Sleepless Eye. "Come on, and keep your gun handy."

Colonel Blunt limped slowly along by the side of his companion, each of them holding their six-shooters ready to fire at the first sign of an attack.

"I don't like this," said Sleepless Eye. "We shall be a target for anybody who chooses to pick us off from the bush."

Colonel Blunt looked at his companion in surprise.

He had never seen Sleepless Eye so timid before.

"What makes you so nervous?" he asked. "You talk as if we were sure to be picked off, when we know almost for certain that the Angel Camp gang are miles away."

"I feel that we shall have trouble before morning," said Sleepless Eye, solemnly. "And when I have that sort of feeling I am never mistaken. Now, mark my words."

The blazing car by this time had changed into a heap of glowing red. The original shape of the structure still partly remained, and looked like a temple from the lower regions, with all the infernal accompaniments of fire, sulphur and demoniacal heat.

Ever and anon, as a gust of wind swept through the woods from the mountains and reached the red charcoal to which the car was reduced, it sent a brighter glow through it, as if nature's bellows were being worked industriously by some mighty power to complete a work of destruction only half-accomplished.

The subdued hum of the lowering fire had succeeded the roar of flames and crackling of wood which had arisen when the car first caught, and the smoke and sparks had long since mingled with the upper atmosphere and dispersed in every direction, to whisper delightedly in other quarters of the destruction they had left behind.

"Better keep on this side, I guess," said Sleepless Eye. "Then we shall have the car between us and the bushes."

"All right, Cap. Anything you say goes with me," replied Blunt.

Cautiously the two men walked toward the car, fingers on triggers ready for action.

Not a sign or sound of another human being was to be seen or heard.

"It must be nearly four o'clock," said Blunt, shivering. "Four hours, at least, to put in. Wish we had something to eat."

"Smoke, instead," suggested Sleepless Eye.

"Good idea. I will."

They had reached the burning car by this time, and were standing at a respectful distance trying to peer into the interior.

"Seems to me I can see the safe," said Colonel Blunt. "Isn't that it, underneath those joists between the rear wheels?"

"I believe it is," replied Sleepless Eye. "And see, there is that big iron chest behind it. The Express Company won't lose much, after all."

"Ah! I begin to feel a good deal better," said Blunt, as the grateful warmth permeated his system and took the cramps out of his joints.

"Have you got any anything to smoke?" asked Sleepless Eye.

"Would you like a fifty-cent regalia or a Flor del Fuma from my private cigar box?" asked Blunt, with a grin.

"Common old tobacco will do for me this morning," replied Sleepless Eye, pulling out his briarwood pipe from an inside pocket. "Give me a pipeful."

Colonel Blunt handed Sleepless Eye a plug of tobacco, which the latter proceeded to cut up in a professional way with his bowie-knife. Then he gave the plug back to Blunt, who filled an old-fashioned corn-cob with the soothing weed.

"Ah! This is comfort, indeed," said the latter, as he took his first whiff.

"Sure as you're born," replied Sleepless Eye, puffing away contentedly, but with a sharp eye and ear for possible danger, notwithstanding.

Hardly were the words spoken, when Sleepless Eye's pipe went flying from his mouth, almost simultaneously with the sharp crack of a rifle in the bushes.

Mechanically, the two men dropped flat on the ground, so that the burning car was between them and the unseen foe, who had so nearly brought Sleepless Eye's career to a sudden end.

"You were right, Sleepless Eye," said Colonel Blunt. "The Angel Camp gang are here yet."

Both men were thoroughly on the alert.

"Save your fire until you are certain of your aim, colonel," said Sleepless Eye, as Blunt commenced to crawl toward the end of the car, where he could get a glimpse of the bushes. "Remember that you are in a glare of light."

Another shot whizzing close to Blunt's ear

emphasized Sleepless Eye's warning, and he hastily drew back.

"What the deuce are we to do?" asked Blunt.

"We are in a pretty bad box."

"Hallo! Look there!" said Sleepless Eye, as he shaded his eyes from the fire with his hand, and looked intently down the track.

"Where?"

"See, on the track."

"A man, by gracious!"

"Who do you think it is?"

"Why?" said Blunt, excitedly, "it is—"

"Who?"

"I'll kill him! Let me get at him!" yelled Blunt, in a perfect frenzy of anger, as he started to his feet.

"Lie down, you fool!" said Sleepless Eye.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Jacques Renaire—the white-headed scoundrel," was the reply, in tones that told of the most deadly hate and contempt.

"Well, keep quiet for a few minutes until we get an idea of his game. The rest of the gang are not far off, you may be sure."

With difficulty Sleepless Eye persuaded his companion to lie flat down again, and the two watched the form of the dwarf in its sinuous passage across the track in the foggy gloom.

He evidently thought himself unobserved, and was trying to get where he would have a safe shot at Sleepless Eye and Blunt. He knew the treasure that was hidden in the now smoldering embers, and meant to have it, if possible, at any cost.

"It is no use, Sleepless Eye. I can't stay here," said Colonel Blunt.

He started to his feet and rushed toward the dwarf, firing as he ran.

Jacques returned the fire, but without effect.

Blunt was right upon him! His hand was on the shriveled throat! The white head looked ghastly in the fog, and Blunt felt a fierce joy run through him as he knew that his time for trying conclusions had arrived, when, with a quick, scientific thrust of the foot, Renaire knocked Blunt's feet from under him, and sent him headlong to the ground.

Sleepless Eye, who had been following his friend, to help, if necessary, made a dart forward but the dwarf had disappeared in the fog, and only his mocking laugh told that he was in the vicinity to ridicule once more the attempt of the officer to capture his miserable carcass.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOILED BUT NOT BAFFLED.

WHEN Colonel Blunt struggled to his feet after being thrown by the dwarf, Sleepless Eye could not help laughing at his friend's rueful countenance.

"Seems as if you never would get even with that precious scoundrel, colonel, doesn't it?" he said.

"Darn his ugly picture! He wrestles like an old sport," was the reply of the colonel, as he felt himself all over to find out where his bruises were. "I was not expecting a trick like that, or I would have been ready for him."

"That is just where he always gets ahead. He takes us unawares every time."

"Hallo!" broke in Colonel Blunt, who stumbled over something on the ground. "Here is his rifle, by jimmynie! Well, I will take the liberty of minding it for him until he applies for it."

"I wonder if he has any other weapons," said Sleepless Eye.

"Don't think so. When he left us in the car I know he had nothing. He must have picked up this rifle somewhere outside, but there are ten chances to one against his having a pistol too."

"Well, shall we follow him? How do you feel about it?" asked Sleepless Eye.

"I would follow him if I thought there was any chance for catching him," said Blunt, vindictively.

"Well, don't you think the chances are good?"

"No, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because we could never get near him in this fog unless he wanted us to do so. And if he wanted to meet us very badly, I should not want to meet him at that particular moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he is as cunning and treacherous as an Indian, and that if he let us come up with him it would only be to draw us into an ambush."

"You are right, colonel," said Sleepless Eye. "I guess we shall have to let him go this time. But I will watch his crib in Frisco and it will not be long before I will have him stowed away in jail, to prepare him for a prolonged residence in the penitentiary."

"You have enough against him without this job, haven't you?" asked Blunt. "Some counterfeiting lay, isn't it?"

"Yes, and there are more than him in it," was Sleepless Eye's significant reply.

"Ha! ha! ha!" sounded apparently almost in their ear, as if in derision of Sleepless Eye's last remark.

To put the rifle to his shoulder and fire in the direction of the voice was for Colonel Blunt the work of a second.

The only response was another mocking laugh—this time further off, but in Jacques Renaire's well-known voice.

Again Blunt fired toward the voice but this time no sound followed save the echoes of the report from mountain-side and valley, as they were tossed to and fro across the ranges of hills on the heavy banks of fog.

"The fire is about out," said Sleepless Eye, glancing toward the ruins of the Express car, where one feeble red glimmer showed that the fire-fiend was loosing his hold regretfully.

"Well, we had better get back and watch it," returned Blunt. "It is no use wasting more time over that little wretch. I guess he has gone this time. You see, you were wrong about the Angel Camp gang being around. We should have seen something of them before this if they intended to try their luck with the Express car."

"Yes, I guess they got scared when the train party chased them into the woods. As to Jacques Renaire, it was just one of his tricks to be false to the gang. If he could capture the swag for himself he would not let anybody else in. You can bet on that," said Sleepless Eye.

The two men walked up the track, and looked at the red lantern which cast its lurid glare on the rails and gave warning to possible trains that there was an obstruction.

"It is a good thing the train-men thought of the lanterns," said Blunt. "Though I suppose there won't be any trains along here before daylight. Didn't you say so?"

"Yes. The first will be a Freight about eight o'clock in the morning," said Sleepless Eye. "Still it would be very bad railroading to leave an obstructed track without a danger signal."

The eyes of both were fixed on the red lights while speaking.

Why do they start, and clutch each other involuntarily with one hand, while the fingers of the other mechanically seek the trigger?

What do they see that gives them a thrill of nameless horror?

Why do they feel as if some supernatural agency were working around them to compass their destruction?

The lantern had suddenly disappeared!

For a second Colonel Blunt and Sleepless Eye had each seen a lank, bony hand before the red glass, and then—darkness!

"Who was it?

That was the question each asked of the other with bated breath, and which neither wished to answer.

"Then the word 'Jacques Renaire!' rose simultaneously to the lips of both.

What was his object?

He could not want to steal the lantern for its own intrinsic value. It was too small game for him.

He did not want it to light him on his way, because he had extinguished it already.

He could not expect to wreck a train. He would know as well as any one when the next train would pass. He was too methodical not to have secured full information on that point before arranging the attack on the passenger train, which had been attended with such terrible slaughter.

"I believe he has taken that lantern from pure cussedness," said Blunt.

"Ha! There goes the other one, at the other end of the car," said Sleepless Eye. "He turned it around for an instant, so that we could see the light, and then put it out."

Once more did Colonel Blunt try to put a bullet in the body of the mischievous dwarf, but though he aimed with his rifle straight at the spot where the last lantern had disappeared, there was no cry or groan of pain to show that his shot had found a human resting-place.

"I am tired of this business," said Sleepless Eye. "Let us look carefully around the car, and make sure there is no one sneaking about. Then one of us can take a sleep for an hour, while the other mounts guard. We can relieve each other every hour. It will be a rather short watch, but it will soon be morning, and we ought to divide up the sleeping as evenly as we can."

The two walked around the remains of the car twice, and looked into the gloom on all sides to try and distinguish any unwelcome companions.

Nobody was to be seen, however, and if Jacques Renaire was in the vicinity he was careful not to betray his presence by the slightest sound.

"You can take the first nap, Sleepless Eye," said Blunt. "I do not feel like sleeping just now. I will call you when your time is up."

"All right, colonel; here goes," returned Sleepless Eye with a yawn, as he stretched himself on the ground close to the ashes of the car, which were still hot enough to give out a comfortable degree of warmth. "Keep a sharp lookout, and call me at the end of the hour."

"All right." Sleepless Eye, with his six-shooter in his hand, turned on his side, and dropped off to sleep on

the hard ground with the ease of a man used to roughing it.

Colonel Blunt held his rifle ready for instant action, and walked slowly up and down, in true military style, occasionally stopping to look down at his sleeping companion, or to peer into the ashes of the car and wonder whether the contents of the safe would be found intact when the door was opened.

"I wonder where Jacques is?" he thought. "Never met with such a run of bad luck as I have had with him to-night. Well, I guess Sleepless Eye will fix him when he gets to Frisco. I should like to have had the pleasure of strangling him, but perhaps it will be better for him to be pulled up short in the regular way."

He took off his hat and felt the back of his head.

"That was a bad knock he gave me in the car. Wonder it didn't settle me."

Sleepless Eye turned over and breathed heavily in his sleep.

"Ah!" said Blunt, his attention being called to his companion by the movement. "There is the squarest man that ever lived, and he has stood by me when many a fellow would have only looked after himself and left his partner to his fate. But that ain't Sleepless Eye's way."

The fog seemed to be lifting a little but it was still very dark. Not a star was to be seen, and an inky blackness pervaded everything.

It was the hour before the dawn.

"This is a lonesome job," muttered Blunt. "I wish Sleepless Eye would wake up and talk to me. Not much fear of that, though. He sleeps like a log."

For half an hour longer Colonel Blunt paced to and fro.

He did not feel certain that Jacques had gone, and would not have been surprised to hear a crack from his pistol at any moment.

The fire was quite out and not even a sign of smoke was to be seen.

Since the red lanterns had disappeared there was not a vestige of light or fire in the vicinity.

Colonel Blunt stood by the side of Sleepless Eye's recumbent form, leaning on his rifle, thinking—thinking.

Gradually the intense darkness and stillness had their natural effect.

Colonel Blunt's head sunk down on his hands resting over the muzzle of his rifle, and his senses slowly became benumbed.

He was not asleep, but he certainly was not as wide awake as a sentinel should have been.

Moreover if the rifle had accidentally been discharged the bullet would have blown off the top of his head.

Like a statue he stood, for some minutes, leaning on his rifle.

Then—what was that?

What was that vibration of the air, so indistinct that it could not yet be called a sound.

In a second Colonel Blunt's head was up and every sense on the alert!

"It cannot be!" he muttered breathlessly. "Impossible!"

Still the vibration was there—plainer and plainer!

Now it had become a sound, unmistakably.

Nearer and nearer!

"Sleepless Eye! Sleepless Eye! Wake up! Quick, man, quick!"

Sleepless Eye drew a long sigh, raised one of his arms and let it drop heavily, as he settled himself to sleep again.

"Sleepless Eye! Danger!" said Blunt, giving his companion a rough push with his foot. "Get up!"

"Hallo! What is the matter?" asked Sleepless Eye, suddenly sitting up, with his revolver in his hand.

"Never knew you so hard to wake before," grumbled Blunt.

"Guess I never was so tired before," returned Sleepless Eye.

"Hist! Do you hear? What do you make of that noise?" asked Blunt, listening intently, with his hand on Sleepless Eye's arm.

"Why, surely, it can't be—"

"But it is."

"What?"

"A train coming at full speed!"

"Great heavens! And the lanterns gone!" said Sleepless Eye.

"What shall we do?"

"We must warn them somehow."

"But how?"

"A fire."

"How can we make it?"

"The bushes."

"But have we time?"

"Let us try it."

The two men dashed across the track and hastily gathered a quantity of the dried underbrush which had been protected by the sheltering shrubbery from the damp fog. Then, with their knives they cut down each an armful of twigs and branches. This they piled up in front of the ruins of the car.

Meanwhile the sound of the train was getting terribly distinct.

They could hear the puffing of the engine and even the rumble of the wheels!

"That will do, colonel. That pile is high enough. Lend me a match."

Sleepless Eye carefully set light to the mass and blew it gently to start the flame.

"Hurry up, Sleepless Eye, or we shall be too late. It may be a passenger train, and if it should go bouncing into these ruins there would be the worst smash-up ever seen in this section."

The fire slowly crawled up through the heap of grass and twigs, and then—went out.

"Hurry! Another match. Blunt!" said Sleepless Eye. "It will be on us yet, before we can warn them."

"Here you are, Sleepless Eye; but be careful. It is the last one I have."

Carefully and tenderly did Sleepless Eye strike the match—the morsel of splintered wood that alone stood between scores of people and a horrible death! How his heart beat as the blue flame of the phosphorus changed to the yellow glare of the burning wood! How patiently he touched the flame to different parts of the pile!

The train was now in plain view, coming along at fearful speed.

It was a passenger train!

The fire flickered and went almost out. Nothing but red embers remained.

"Blow, Blunt, for all that is in you!" yelled Sleepless Eye, as he bent his lips to the dying fire.

Both blew, while the thunder of the train almost deafened them.

One more puff at the fire! Another! Another!

Hurrah! There was the fire, burning up in a mighty monument of warning.

Down brakes! Reverse the lever! Close the throttle! Danger! Danger! Danger!

The wheels ground on the rails as the brakes were pushed hard down; the engineer threw his lever back and shut off the steam, while the fire blazed high and brilliantly, not two hundred yards away!

Down brakes!

A great shout from Sleepless Eye and Blunt, every man to his post at brake and lever, and—

The train was saved!

CHAPTER XXVII.

VENGEANCE ON A SUSPECTED TRAITOR.

"CURSE the luck!" a white-headed little man, hiding in the bushes, was saying, as he gave a vicious kick to the two red lanterns lying at his feet. "I thought I had fixed them!"

Jacques Renaire (for of course the white-headed little man was no other), watched the movements of the train crew and passengers, as they assisted Sleepless Eye and Colonel Blunt in clearing the remains of the Express car from the track by the light of the fire, with baffled malignity plainly written on his features.

"This job has failed," he muttered.

He was right.

The ponderous safe, upon which his eyes had been fixed with unabated cupidity from the moment the train was stopped until and after the Express car was burned, was being lifted bodily aboard a baggage car, and was quickly followed by the iron chests.

Then Sleepless Eye, Blunt, and those who had so narrowly escaped death or injury in a frightful railroad disaster, climbed to their respective places on the train, the two just named of course in the baggage-car, where they could keep their eyes on the precious safe and chests, the engine whistled, and away went the long string of cars on their way to San Francisco.

The day was dawning. The lighter gray in the east, which had displaced the dull opaqueness of the foggy night, now showed a thin streak of crimson, which gradually grew wider, until the sun itself showed the top of its fiery face on the crest of the mountains.

On the track the morning light showed but few traces of the sensational scenes which had been enacted during the night.

Piled up on one side were the charred timbers of the Express car, while a small heap of scattered ashes showed where the fire which saved the train had blazed.

Beyond these there was nothing to show that blood had been spilled, lives sacrificed, and a train nearly wrecked within a few short hours.

"I thought I was safe for some of that swag," said Jacques Renaire, as he walked on the track and looked around. "If that train had not been signaled there would have been a fine smash-up, and I could have got what I wanted in the confusion. Never mind, Sleepless Eye, I will get even with you yet, as well as with that fellow, Blunt, as sure as my name is Jacques Renaire."

He turned and walked away.

As he stepped toward the bushes there was a puff of white smoke, a sharp report, and a bullet whistled past his ear.

The dwarf's hand flew to his belt, and his revolver was in his hand on the instant.

He did not fire, however.

What was the use?

His enemy, whoever he was, had the advantage of cover, while he (Jacques) offered a fair target for him.

Then a loud laugh rung out from the bushes, and Ed Ralston, followed by five of his gang, confronted Renaire.

"Hallo, Jacques!" called out Ralston. "What are you doing here, all alone, like a buzzard in an empty wigwam?"

"Nothing particular," was answered.

"Well, come along, then. There is nothing to be made here. I thought I should find you at the camp."

"Well, you made a mistake, didn't you?" snarled Jacques.

"Don't get mad. What if the job did slip up, you did not lose any more than the rest, did you?"

"I don't know about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"Perhaps you were trying to work it for yourself, leaving out the rest of the gang?" said Ralston, looking suspiciously at the dwarf.

"Perhaps I was."

"It was a good job you failed then?"

"Why?"

"You know the rules of the gang."

"The gang is nothing to me," said Jacques, sullenly.

"It isn't, eh?"

"No."

During this dialogue the rest had been gathering around the two speakers and there were muttered remarks that boded no good to Jacques Renaire.

He was not very popular with the gentry composing the Angel Camp gang, and there were some who would have picked a quarrel with him were it not that he managed to exercise a certain influence over them that bordered on the supernatural. He was a dead-snot with rifle and pistol, and could pull so quickly that he would have to be a smart man who could get the drop on him.

At this moment, while talking, he held his heavy six-shooter carelessly in his hand, with his finger on the trigger. He could have killed two or three of his companions on the instant had he thought it necessary.

"What do you mean by that remark, Jacques Renaire?" asked Ed Ralston, sternly. "Don't you know that you ain't acting like a square man, and that the gang ain't satisfied?"

"I tell you I don't care anything about the gang," said the dwarf. "I attend to my own business, and as long as I don't give anything away I don't see what you are grumbling about?"

"You know that when a job is put up by the gang, every one is expected to work together."

"Well?"

"And that there must not be anything done by one man that the others have not agreed to," continued Ralston.

"Well?"

"And that if a man is caught breaking the rules—"

Jacques started.

"Ah! I need not tell you the penalty. You know well enough," said Ralston.

"But who says I have broken the rules?" asked Renaire, defiantly. "Show me the man who accuses me!"

He glared around at the group and the hand that held the pistol trembled.

Suddenly, Ralston, looking over the dwarf's shoulder, apparently at some one behind him, said, in a loud, stern voice:

"No. Quit that. Don't strike him from behind!"

The dwarf swung around quickly, to face his imaginary foe.

He saw the ruse instantly, but too late to avail him.

His head had scarcely turned ere Ralston was upon him, holding the right hand that grasped the pistol. Two others sprung to his assistance, and Renaire's gun was captured, while he was forced to the ground and held there.

"What does all this mean?" asked Jacques, ceasing his ineffectual struggle to get up.

"It means that we suspected some underhand work, and we came back to see what you were doing," replied Ralston. "You were seen sneaking around here by yourself, and we concluded you were going back on the gang in some way. Seems we were right, too."

"I'll make it warm for you, Ed Ralston, and for the rest of the gang, too," said Jacques Renaire, grinding his teeth. "You will be sorry you ever fooled with me, mark my words!"

"What shall we do with him, boys?" said Ralston, turning to his companions.

There was an ominous murmur from the lips of the men who suspected treachery on the part of the dwarf, which resolved itself into the twoateful words:

"Hang him!"

"What?" yelled Renaire, his white face turning a sickly blue.

"It is no use, Jacques. Your time has come," said Ralston. "The gang is being hunted so closely now that we cannot afford to have a traitor in camp."

"Well, but give me some show for my life. I am surely entitled to a trial. You have nothing proved against me," said the dwarf.

"We have all the proof we want."

"Where is it?"

"You separated from the gang; stayed around here by yourself; and for anything we know were going to give us all away. Even if you did not mean anything worse than getting the whole swag from the Express car for your

self you are liable to the punishment made and provided for such cases," said Ed Ralston, who rather prided himself on his knowledge of legal terms.

"Hang him!" came in chorus from the others. "What's the use of letting him palaver that way? We are too near the railroad anyhow, and we want to get away from here," added one, who, with his large red beard, and penetrating gray eyes looking from beneath heavy red eyebrows, had not a vestige of mercy in his whole make-up.

"Well, go ahead, boys. I guess you are right. There is no time to lose. That Freight train will be along very soon," said Ralston.

"You are going to murder me in cold blood, are you?" asked Renaire, faintly. His courage had nearly all oozed out now that he was brought face to face with certain death.

"That's about the size of it, if you want to use the word 'murder,'" said Ralston, carelessly. "But we call it 'execution.' It's a prettier expression, and comes nearer to the truth."

"Curse you!" hissed the dwarf.

"We suspected that you were not acting altogether square," continued Ralston, "and we came prepared for business."

"What do you mean?"

"Got that rope ready, Bill?"

"Yes; here it is," replied the red-whiskered man, showing a coil of rope about an inch thick, which he had hitherto concealed behind him.

"Take him back in the wood, then, and let us get the job over," said Ralston.

The dwarf was lifted to his feet, and the rope fastened around his arms and body. Then he was led from the track, through the bushes that lined the railroad until a spot was reached where a large pine stood alone in a clearing.

"Hold him tight and put the end of the rope over that limb," said Ralston.

"Now," he continued, when this was done, "tie his hands and feet. You can spare a piece of the rope for that. That is right. He's sense enough, I guess. Now make a noose. Will that slip-knot run easily? We ought to have some soap for it. But Mr. Renaire will have to excuse that."

The dwarf had stood quite still while these preparations were going forward, but it was evident that his active brain was eagerly working to devise some plan of escape.

"All ready?" asked Ralston, as the end of the rope was manned by two of the gang, while the other three stood closely around the victim.

With his hands and feet securely fastened, the noose around his shriveled neck, and determined men ready to pull him up to his death, the dwarf's situation was a critical one.

"Got anything to say, Jacques?" asked Ed Ralston.

"What about?"

"I don't know. It is customary to ask a man that question before he is swung up, though I'm blessed if I know what for," returned Ralston. "But we always do it with horse-thieves. Guess you ought to have the same privilege as a horse-thief."

"I have a good deal to say," said Jacques.

"Well, say it quick. If you make your speech too long, I am afraid this meeting will adjourn before you get through."

"In the first place, I have not gone back on the gang at all," commenced Jacques, looking with an evil eye on his companions.

"That's too thin," said the red-headed man, with a shake of the head.

"Shut up, Bill, and let him have his say," said Ralston.

"In the second place, I have not had any trial, which the rules of the gang call for," continued the dwarf.

"These are troublous times, and we cannot wait for ceremony," said Ralston. "I will take the responsibility of stretching your neck."

"The third and last thing I have to say," went on Jacques, "is that it will be the worst day's work you ever did if you murder me. There are people in Frisco who will wipe this gang out of existence if any harm comes to me. You know that I can always make my words good, and I will do it in this case, dead or alive!"

"Pull him up, boys!" said Ralston, stepping back.

The five men got a firm hold on the rope, while Ralston stood at the dwarf's side, to guard against the remotest possibility of his escape.

Jacques Renaire was a slippery customer, and it was not possible to be too careful when dealing with him.

"Everything ready?" asked Ralston.

"All ready," responded the red-bearded man.

"Up with him, then!"

There was one wild, despairing look from Jacques, a strain at the rope, as the five men started away from the tree on a run, and the dwarf was dangling in the air, his legs being drawn up in convulsive struggles and his whole body writhing in agony.

"Tie the end of the rope to that other tree," commanded Ralston, "and then let us get."

The order was obeyed, and the six men started on a brisk walk through the forest, never looking in the direction of their victim, who was swaying backward and forward in the morning

breeze, as hideous an object as ever disfigured a summer landscape in the great State of California.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT JACK TOLD THE CONDUCTOR.

The station-master, baggage-master, porter, and telegraph operator at Snaggs's Bottom were all comprised in one individual.

A saturnine, disappointed-looking man of perhaps forty years of age, with a pale face, lank, straw-colored hair, and a wheezy voice, which fifteen years of mountain air had not sufficed to improve. He had a contemplative manner, and his eyes were prone to become set in a fixed stare, from long habit of listening to the tick of the telegraph instrument. He lived as a boarder in a farm-house three miles from the station, and the only pleasure he seemed to enjoy was smoking a finely-colored meerschaum pipe which appeared to be as old as its owner.

He came slowly walking through the wood this morning on his way to the station, with the black meerschaum firmly gripped between his teeth, talking to himself.

"Another day of work. I tell you, Jack Bobbett, you have a mighty exciting life. All by yourself, except when you have a few minutes' conversation with some cranky conductor who thinks he is boss of the universe because he has charge of a Freight train."

Jack Bobbett pulled savagely at his pipe, and looking at his watch, quickened his pace.

"I'll have to hurry. That eight o'clock Freight has to be met," he said. "I shall not have much time to spare if it is on schedule time—which, of course, it won't be, as usual."

Grumbling this to himself, he kept his eyes on the ground as he hurried along under the pines and cypresses which cast heavy shades over his pathway, and seemed to add to the solitude.

"Hallo! What's this?"

He had come into forcible collision with a rope stretched tightly across his path and fastened to a pine on his right.

He raised his eyes and followed the course of the rope to the other end.

A man hanging by the neck!

Jack Bobbett's straw-colored hair bristled up, and almost lifted his hat off.

Truly the sight was not a pleasing one.

Jacques Renaire had ceased to struggle. He hung limp and motionless. His eyes were wide open and staring horribly into vacancy. His face was blue, and his white hair made a ghastly frame for the drawn features.

"Quite dead!" said Jack Bobbett, when he had recovered from his first shock of horror and surprise.

The wind swayed the body slightly and the head of the dwarf seemed to nod as if in confirmation of Bobbett's opinion.

"Horse-thief, I suppose!"

The wind shook the limb again, and this time the head turned from side to side with the motion, apparently denying the insinuation.

"Well, I'll cut him down anyhow. He's gone, of course, but it don't seem human to leave him hanging there like a dead dog."

Bobbett was from the East originally, and though he had lived in California fifteen years, had never happened to see a victim of Judge Lynch's sentence before. Moreover, he was not such a firm believer in the equity of such proceedings as some of those who had suffered from the depredations of horse and cattle-thieves.

"He is not a very handsome object, but any kind of a man is too good to be hanged unless he is a murderer. That's my opinion," said Jack Bobbett, as he drew out his pocket-knife.

Holding the rope in one hand, he cut below his grasp with the other.

"He's heavy, by gosh!" he said, as the weight of the dwarf made the rope very hard to hold.

Gently he let down the corpse until it lay at full length on the stubby grass.

"There you are, my beauty," said Bobbett, looking down at all that was mortal of Jacques Renaire. "Now the question is, what am I going to do with you?"

He looked at his watch.

"The Freight should be along here in less than ten minutes. I guess I will get some of the boys to help me with him. Don't know whether we ought to bury him right away or wait for the coroner. The Lord knows where the coroner is. I am sure I don't. Probably playing poker in some mining-camp among the mountains."

Jack Bobbett was sorely troubled.

"He is an ugly little wretch," he continued, looking down at the dwarf. "Couldn't have been very handsome even when he was alive. But now he is like a nightmare."

Jack Bobbett took off his hat and scratched at his straw-colored head.

Then he took a large red handkerchief from his pocket and looked at it ruefully.

"I must cover his face. And yet I hate to lose this handkerchief. I only have two, and I can never use this again if it goes on his face."

He held up the handkerchief and gazed at it and Renaire's face alternately.

The last look at the blue-white visage and startling eyeballs determined him.

He dropped the handkerchief over the face,

taking care that his hands did not touch it, and again looked at his watch.

"I guess he will be safe here for half an hour," he said, as he moved away. "It is none of my business if anybody steals him anyhow."

Jack Bobbett looked back as he said these words as if there was a strange fascination about the rigid figure and the concealed face.

Bobbett could not shake off the impression that the corpse was making grimaces at him under the handkerchief.

"I am a nervous idiot," he muttered. "But I will settle it by taking another peep at the face."

With hands that would tremble in spite of himself, Jack Bobbett cautiously lifted a corner of the handkerchief.

The set face and wide-open eyes were just the same as when he last looked.

"Now I must get down to the station without any more fooling," he said, as he dropped the handkerchief again.

What was that?

Bobbett's straw-colored hair stood on end once more.

What had he seen?

Why did he keep his eyes fixed in one direction with a look of horror such as they perhaps had never known before?

What ghostly visitant was creeping through the woodland shadows and beckoning him to the other world?

It was not a ghost that Jack Bobbett saw?

It was the right hand of the dead man slowly raising itself toward his head!

Jack Bobbett could not move or speak! He hardly breathed!

The hand kept up its gradual movement to the head, while the rest of the figure lay perfectly still.

It seemed as if life had come to the arm and hand, leaving the rest of the body in its former condition of rigid death.

Ah! The fingers are gradually closing, as if clutching for something.

Bobbett's knees trembled under him.

The fingers had reached the handkerchief. With the same slow, steady motion, they opened and closed on the corner of it. Then they began pulling it from the face.

If Bobbett had been turned to stone, he could not have stood more like a statue.

Slowly the handkerchief was drawn from the face.

Bobbett could not have moved his eyes from it if his life had depended on his looking another way.

The face was uncovered!

It was still the blue-white face of a corpse!

Round the neck the noose still rested loosely, the red ridge it had raised on the throat being plainly visible.

When the handkerchief was drawn from the face, the hand remained still save for a nervous movement of the fingers.

Then Bobbett recovered himself all at once.

"What a fool I am," he said. "The man is not dead. That is evident."

Jack Bobbett believed in supplying himself with creature comforts while keeping his lonely watch at the station during the day. He always had a flask of good brandy in his pocket. It was just the one thing needful in the present emergency, he thought.

He hastily drew the precious article from his inner pocket.

Then he poured a little in the hollow of his hand, and put it on the lips of the dwarf.

"Guess it will choke him if I put it down his throat," he reflected. "He has had a close call, as it is, and it won't take much to fix him yet."

He put more of the liquor on the cold lips, rubbed some on the forehead and in the palms of the hands.

Soon the effect of the treatment showed itself. The eyes gradually assumed a natural appearance, the bluish tinge faded from the cheeks and lips.

Jack Bobbett raised the head and put a little brandy into the mouth.

The dwarf managed to swallow.

"How do you feel now?" asked Bobbett.

But Jacques could not speak yet.

More brandy, and in a few minutes Jacques managed to say, feebly:

"Who are you?"

"Never mind about that," was the reply.

"Who are you?"

The old cunning light was in Jacques Renaire's eyes now as he answered, quickly, though in the merest whisper:

"William Elliott."

"How did you get in this fix?"

"I am a detective."

"Oho!"

"You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Set on by a gang."

"Yes."

"And nearly wiped out, as you see."

"How did you manage to keep life in yourself with a tight rope around your neck?"

The dwarf held out his hand for some more brandy.

"Give me another drink of that. I am pretty weak yet."

Jack Bobbett did as requested, and the dwarf went on, still in a whisper, but a somewhat stronger one than that in which he had before spoken:

"The men who swung me to that tree must have been new to the business. They did not fix the noose properly. When they drew me up it slipped down over my shoulder. It was tight enough around my throat to be decidedly unpleasant, and if you had not come along just when you did, I guess it would have settled me."

"I guess it would."

"They had fastened my hands and feet very tightly, as I suppose you noticed when you cut the ropes, and I could not help myself in the least. I lost consciousness soon, and the next thing I knew was your putting the handkerchief over my face."

"Take a little more brandy," put in Bobbett.

"Thank you."

The dwarf took a long draught, and was able for the first time to speak above a whisper.

"Do you know who the men were?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you will follow them up?"

"Yes, but not now. I can put my hand on them at any moment."

"Who are they?"

"It would not do for me to say. I'll tell you one thing, however. You will find that it was a lucky thing for you when you found me and cut me down. I have plenty of influence in Frisco and I intend to use it to your advantage," said Bobbett.

"I thank you. But I guess there is nothing you can do for me," returned Bobbett.

"Well, we shall see," said Jacques, "But what is that? Did I not hear an engine whistle?"

"Guess you did. That must be the Freight. It ought to have been along before this. I shall only just have time to get to the station and meet it," said Jack Bobbett.

"I will go down with you," said Jacques. "By the way, don't tell any of the trainmen about how you found me. Tell them I want to go to San Francisco, and fix it so that I can ride in their caboose. I will pay them well."

"All right," said Jack Bobbett. "But come along. Do you think you can walk?"

"Oh yes; just help me to my feet."

The dwarf showed the effect of the terrible ordeal he had undergone in his trembling gait, but with Bobbett's assistance he managed to hobble along until the station was reached, with the Freight train rapidly approaching.

In his anxiety to get to the station in time, Jack Bobbet did not notice the remains of the Express car at the side of the track, and Jacques Renaire did not feel in duty bound to call his attention to it.

Living so far from the railroad, he had not heard anything of the trouble the night before.

It will be remembered that though the train was flagged at the station it was not by the railroad officials.

The long Freight train drew up at the platform and Jack Bobbett and the conductor were soon in earnest conversation.

"It is against the rules to take passengers, you know, Jack," the conductor was saying, "without an order from the Division Superintendent."

"Yes, I know, but you can break them for once. It will oblige me personally. This is a friend of mine who wants to get to Frisco as quickly as possible, and I know you are going to make a straight run through."

"Well, Jack, I should like to do it for you, but—"

Jack Bobbett whispered in the conductor's ear.

"Is that so? Did he say so?" asked the latter, with more enthusiasm than he had shown before.

"Yes. He will do it. He said so."

"All right. I will take him."

The whispered remark was to the effect that Renaire would pay well for the accommodation, which was touching the conductor in a tender spot.

"All ready, sir; get aboard!" he said to Jacques, a few minutes later.

The dwarf said not a word, but climbed up the steps into the caboose, where two or three strong-smelling drovers were sitting near a very hot stove.

Jacques took a seat by their side, and looked sharply around.

Then, with a stifled oath, he sprung toward a man in the corner behind the door, with his long fingers outstretched to clutch him by the throat.

The man saw him at the same moment, and with one horrified glance at the fierce eyes of the dwarf, leaped through the open door, ran across the track and disappeared in the bushes at the side.

It was Ed Ralston!

The dwarf sunk back exhausted on the track, but with a fiendish malignity expressed in his face that told how he would have liked to strangle his late partner in crime.

"Kind of scared that fellow, didn't you?" ventured one of the drovers.

"Yes; I am a detective, and I have a warrant for that fellow," replied Jacques. "Never mind; I'll have him yet."

"What's he been doing?"

"Counterfeiting."

"Pretty serious offense."

"Yes."

"Is there any more in the gang, or does he work alone?"

"No. There is a big gang."

"Where do they hang out?"

"Back in the mountains a piece."

"Has the gang got any name? Most of them have," said the drover.

"Yes; they call this the Angel Camp Gang," replied Jacques.

"Seems to me I know something about that gang. I heard there was a little man belonged to it that was suspected of going back on them, and that they were going to lynch him as soon as they could prove it on him."

"Who told you that?"

"Oh! a friend of mine. One gets acquainted with all sorts of people in my line of business."

The dwarf looked suspiciously at the speaker.

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor, and the train commenced to move.

At the same moment Jacques Renaire recognized in the drover the red-bearded man called Bill, who had hanged him an hour or so before. His whiskers had been cut off, but the dwarf knew him and bided his time.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GARNETT FINDS A FRIEND.

WHEN Victor Renaire was foiled by Garnett so unexpectedly in his attempt to obtain possession of the ebony box from the groceryman, he was in such a rage at the interference that he would doubtless have struck the young girl if he had not had his hands full with the man.

The groceryman evidently realized this, for he smiled sarcastically at Victor as he caught him by the throat and put the muzzle of his revolver to the head of the dwarf.

"I don't know but I ought to shoot you right down; and I believe, if it wasn't for the girl, I would do it. Don't you ever play a trick like that on me again, though, or it might be bad for you," said the big groceryman, slowly and heavily, as if it were almost too much trouble to talk.

He pushed Victor back, and told him to go in the back room.

The dwarf was so disconcerted at being treated in this off-hand manner that he obeyed the command almost before he knew what he was doing.

"Come here, Garnett," he said.

"You stay where you are," said the groceryman.

But Garnett had caught the dwarf's eye and quickly followed him, despite the behest of the big groceryman.

"Well, it is hard to understand girls, that is a fact," said the man, as he coolly lay down on his couch again behind the counter. "There is that young creature; evidently she don't take any stock in that dwarf, yet she follows him around like a poodle dog."

In the mean time, Victor was leading Garnett to her room.

He found that the lock on the door was old and worn out, and that when he thought he had fastened it securely, he had only caught the bolt in a worm-eaten piece of wood that gave way on slight pressure.

Garnett had heard the disturbance down-stairs and had come quickly down in response to an irresistible impulse.

"I'll watch you this time," said Victor. "Go inside and I will lie down outside your door."

The night passed without further adventure, and when the three sat down to a substantial breakfast in the morning, prepared by the slow-moving groceryman, there was no reference to the events of the night.

"The stage-coach will be here at ten o'clock, you say?" observed Victor to the groceryman.

"That is the time it is due."

"Has it ever been held up by road-agents since that time two years ago?" asked Victor.

"Yes; Black Bart tackled it lately, but he didn't get anything. He bit off more than he could chew in the shape of a young fellow they called a dude. Black Bart was nearly going under that time."

"But he escaped, I suppose?"

"Yes, he got away. He seems to have the devil's own luck."

"So I've heard."

"Yes, but he will be pulled up short some time. Those fellows always are."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Did you ever meet this Black Bart?" suddenly asked the groceryman, looking full at Victor.

"Who—I? No. What makes you ask that?"

"Oh, nothing," was the careless reply. "Though, if he don't belong to that Angel Camp gang, I am very much mistaken," he added to himself, as he walked to the door and looked up the road, with his rough great hand shading his eyes.

"By the way," said Victor, following him to

the door, "can't I make a bargain with you for that ebony box?"

"No," was the prompt reply.

"Why not?"

"It belongs to a gentleman in San Francisco, and I am going to return it to him with my own hands."

"What is his name? Will you tell me?"

"Yes. Dr. Milton."

Victor started.

"Do—do you know him?"

"I do, very well."

"How do you know the box belongs to him?"

"He confessed that it was his."

"Confessed! Why do you use that word?" asked Victor, insinuatingly. "Anybody would think he were guilty of a *crime* in possessing it."

"Do you know what it contains?" asked the groceryman, and it was noticeable that in his earnestness he spoke quickly, sharply, and decidedly, without any of the lazy drawl that distinguished his conversation in general.

"I know that it contains a plate of some kind," said Victor.

"Yes. It is a plate for printing thousand-dollar bank notes, and the mere possession of it constitutes a felony."

"Then what are you doing with it?"

"That I can explain when the proper time comes. But here is the coach coming down the hill. It don't stay long here. So you and the young girl had better get ready to move."

Victor Renaire looked at the speaker with a malevolent glance, but it was utterly lost upon the self-contained groceryman.

The dwarf turned away and called Garnett.

The girl came slowly to the door and stood between the dwarf and the groceryman.

She turned her face toward the latter for a minute and looked beseechingly in his face.

He understood the mute appeal and Victor Renaire was never so near being choked to death in his life before as he was at that moment.

But the arrival of the stage prevented any immediate demonstrations of hostility.

The horses drew up with a flourish and the groceryman was soon busy unhitching them and assisting the driver to get the fresh horses from the stable.

The coach contained three people. Two were elderly women, who had fallen asleep, and who snored away undisturbed by the commotion incident to the stopping of the coach and changing of horses. The third was a man huddled up in a corner, with a large slouch hat drawn down so far that it was impossible to discern his features. He was evidently awake, because he moved his feet several times in a nervous way, as if impatient of delay, but he did not look out of the window or offer to get out for the purpose of stretching his cramped limbs.

"There they are, Joe," said the groceryman at last. "Now you can make tracks for Santora as soon as you like."

"Hold on!" cried Victor, running out of the store and leading Garnett by the hand. "Here are a couple of passengers for you."

"That's so, by gracious!" exclaimed the groceryman. "I had forgotten you."

"One of them will have to ride outside," said the driver, gruffly. "There are three inside already, and the coach won't hold more than four with any comfort."

"Get up there," said the groceryman to Victor. "I'll attend to the young lady."

"Never mind," returned Victor; "I'll put her inside myself."

He opened the door and carefully scrutinized the passengers inside. Then he assisted Garnett into the coach.

She sat by the side of the man with the big slouch hat, who made no movement to indicate that he was aware of another passenger having entered.

"You keep quiet until I help you out, do you hear?" said Victor, in his surly way.

"Yes, Victor," replied Garnett.

At the sound of her voice the man with the slouch hat gave a little start, but it was so slight that it escaped the dwarf's notice.

Victor climbed up to the seat by the side of the driver, his white hair glistening in the sunlight like a dead herring.

No sooner had he left the coach door than the man in the slouch hat turned toward Garnett, threw back his hat and disclosed the features of *Ralph Milton!*

"Garnett!"

"Ralph!"

The old women on the opposite seat continued to snore.

"Where are you going, Garnett?"

"I don't know. Victor Renaire has me in his power. Oh! Ralph, save me!"

To throw open the door and jump out was with Ralph the work of a moment.

He clasped Garnett round the waist and lifted her in the road just as the driver started his horses and the coach dashed away.

"Bravo!" yelled the groceryman in a subdued but delighted tone, as he saw Ralph and Garnett standing in front of him and the coach disappearing in a cloud of dust.

Ralph drew Garnett gently toward the house,

and asked her what she was doing here with Victor Renaire.

"But what do I care," he added, "as long as you are here? I thought I should find you. I could not believe it possible that I was never to see you again. Well, you shall never go out of my sight again until I give you safe into the care of your father in Pinewood."

"Well, I don't know about that, exactly," said the groceryman. "I want to be in San Francisco to-morrow and I should like the young lady to be there, too. That could be managed, couldn't it?" he added, turning to Ralph. "By the way, I don't know your name."

"My name is Ralph Milton."

"Milton? Are you any relation to Dr. Milton who lives at —?"

"Dr. Milton is my father," said Ralph, with a touch of pride.

"Um!" said the groceryman.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Garnett. "Who is that coming down the road?"

"The white-headed little cuss, by gosh!" said the groceryman. "You and Ralph Milton go in the back room. I'll tackle this fellow myself. He made a mistake in coming back, I'm thinking."

"Where is she?" panted Victor Renaire, as he reached the house. "You have her here somewhere, I am sure. Curse you, I'll tear out the side of your house but what I'll find her."

"Don't excite yourself," said the groceryman, with his most provoking drawl. "You tried to play a dirty trick on me once, and you know how it ended. You had better take time to cool off."

"Where is that girl—my daughter?"

"I don't know where your daughter is."

"I believe she is in your house. Let me come in," said Victor, as he tried to push past the groceryman into the house."

"Stand back!" said the groceryman, as he gripped the dwarf by the shoulder and swung him around into the middle of the road. "This is my house."

"There she is. I can see her in the back room," yelled Victor in a perfect frenzy. "Garnett, come here!"

The influence he had always held over Garnett seemed to be still irresistible to her, for she was slowly walking toward him, when Ralph interposed himself and held her back.

"Stay where you are, Garnett," said Ralph.

"Oho! You are here, too, are you?" shrieked Victor. "Then it is you who are inciting my daughter to disobedience? I'll soon bring you to terms. I have a hold on your father that I will tighten up until I make him squeal if you don't do as I tell you."

"You villain, I defy you!" said Ralph, disdainfully.

"You do, eh?" said the dwarf. "Just come out here. I want to speak to you."

"Don't go, Ralph—Mr. Milton," whispered Garnett, timidly. "He means mischief, I am sure!"

Ralph pressed her hand, in mute thanks for her interest in him, but was going out, nevertheless, when the groceryman exclaimed:

"Never mind about speaking to him, Victor Renaire. I have something to say to you."

He spoke a few words to the dwarf in a low tone.

Victor Renaire's face turned as white as his head as he started back and shrieked: "You're a liar!"

"Oh, no, I am not," returned the groceryman, as with a swift movement, he slipped a pair of handcuffs on Renaire's wrists and dragged him into the store.

"I'll make you pay for this outrage," howled the dwarf. "As for you, Ralph Milton, I'll have your father in the penitentiary before he is a week older. Mark my words!"

"Take care you don't get there yourself," said the groceryman, quietly.

"Oh, what does all this mean?" asked Garnett, wringing her hands in bewilderment and terror.

"It means that all three of us must be in San Francisco to-morrow," returned the groceryman, with a peculiar smile.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STORY THAT IT TOOK TWO PEOPLE TO TELL.

The sun was sinking slowly behind the ridge of mountains that overhung the valley in which the grocery and stage-stable nestled. Victor Renaire had been put safely in an underground apartment where there was no danger of his doing mischief while waiting for the advent of the stage that would make connection with the San Francisco train to-morrow.

The groceryman sat in his store, smoking a cigar and whittling a piece of pine. His mind was at rest. He had got Victor Renaire in his clutches and he would soon bring him face to face with past crimes and make him own himself a villain.

"Of course I might have arrested him before," he muttered, "but I thought I might as well let him go to Frisco by himself, because I knew where I could lay my hands on him when I got there. However, his monkey-business with the girl stopped all that, and I had to put the nips

on him. I guess it is just as well, though Anyhow, I ain't going to worry about it."

And the groceryman took up a fresh piece of pine and whittled away to his heart's content.

But where were Garnett and Ralph?

They were nowhere around the house, apparently.

The groceryman seemed satisfied that they were all right, and occasionally as he glanced out of the door to a little ledge of rock a few hundred yards away he would snicker in a jolly manner as if he rather enjoyed the prospect.

The little ledge of rock formed one of the cosiest seats you ever saw, just big enough for two persons—provided they sat close together.

The two people who occupied it just now were observing this provision carefully, and they didn't feel crowded either.

Garnett, in her gray dress and pretty hat, with its red feather, looked like a mountain rose coyly clinging to its native home, while Ralph's tall, manly, but lithe form was a pleasing adjunct to the softer outlines of his companion.

The sun was getting very low now, and the great shadows were slowly creeping over the road and toying with the sunlight at their feet like the waves of a mighty ocean eager to float them into the unknown land of futurity.

The two had been walking up the road engaged in earnest conversation, and now, having reached the vicinity of the house that was their temporary home, had sat down on this rude resting-place in the cool evening until it should be time to retire for the night.

"Garnett, you have told me how you came to be with the Renaires," Ralph was saying.

"Have I not? Well, it is a very simple story. I was with Mr. Strood, who says he is not my real father, but who is the only father I have ever known, until one day a long time ago, when Victor Renaire took me away to San Francisco and has kept me there ever since."

"But why did Mr. Strood let you go?"

"He wasn't at home."

"Why didn't you escape from the Renaires and go back to your father? They used to let you go out on the street without any watch being kept over you, did they not?"

"Yes, but you forgot that I was only a child and for years did not know where my father lived. I knew it was in Pinewood, but I hadn't the least idea where it was."

"But you could easily have found out," suggested Ralph.

"Ah, you cannot conceive what it is for a young girl—a child—to be alone and friendless, without money and under the influence of the evil eye of a man like Victor Renaire. Even now, though I know he is manacled and is securely locked up, I fear him. He possesses a magnetic influence over me that I feel certain he must derive from the Evil One. I cannot believe that it is human."

"Why do you suppose he kept you, away from your friends? Of what use were you to him?"

"He used to send me out to purchase things for the house, and he always gave me a big piece of money to get changed—generally a twenty-dollar gold-piece. Sometimes people wouldn't take it. They would tell me it was no good, and several times they have talked about having me arrested. But they never did it. They would say something about my being young and innocent and let me go. That did not often happen, though. Generally the money would be taken all right, and I would bring the change home to Victor."

"The villain!" ejaculated Ralph.

"Then, in that front room that you were in I have smelt something like sulphur and hot metals, and I have heard the click of machinery, but they never let me see them doing any work there. They always sent me to my room, at such times."

"But surely it wasn't worth their while to kidnap you just to use you for passing their bogus money. They must have had some other motive for their action. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do. Though I could not understand it for a very long time. But about six months ago I happened to overhear Victor and his brothers talking when they did not know I was near."

"Ah! What did they say?" asked Ralph, eagerly.

"First, I heard Victor's voice saying: 'Garnett is getting to be a woman now. We can't keep her under our thumb much longer. What shall we do with her?' Then Marcus said: 'Oh, we will find a way to dispose of her. Some one will take her off our hands, I dare say.' Then Victor said: 'I feel sometimes almost like letting her go back. But of course that wouldn't do. She knows too much. Besides, as long as we keep her away from that father of hers we can keep him from interfering with us. I have warned him often that any attempt to trouble us would result not only in the death of Garnett, but of his own real child as well. That fetches him every time.' 'Well done, Victor,' said Jacques. 'You are the boy to work a racket.' And then they all laughed—the three boys and the old woman, and I crept back to bed, afraid

that they might find out I had been listening. If they did know it, I am sure they would have killed me."

"The wretches!" said Ralph. "Well, never mind; they are drawing near to the end of their career of crime, if I am not mistaken. If we can only make that vile creature, Victor Renaire, reveal what he knows about my father and Mr. Strood's own daughter I shall not care, because I shall be satisfied that his treatment of my mother will be avenged. I don't think he was ever in such a tight fix in his life before as he is now."

"See; it is getting quite dark," suddenly exclaimed Garnett, "and there is our friend, the groceryman, lighting a lamp in his store. Had we not better go in?"

"Yes, presently. But there is no particular hurry, is there?" asked Ralph.

"I don't know that there is. I have plenty of time," was Garnett's reply.

"Then let us stay here a little while longer. I have a question to ask you."

"A question?"

"Yes."

"About the Renaire?"

"No."

"About Mr. Strood?"

"No."

"Well, what is it?"

"It is one that I cannot ask lightly. Nor do I wish you to answer it without due consideration."

"I always weigh well what I say," returned Garnett, with a touch of coquetry.

It is wonderful how quickly a girl can see what is coming, long before a young man can put his feelings into words.

Garnett, in spite of the secluded life she had led, and of the fact that she had never listened to compliments before, was no exception to the rule.

And, woman-like, she was inclined to prolong the agony.

"Are you sure you can answer this question honestly, without any reservation, mental or spoken?" asked Ralph, insensibly dropping into a legal form of catechism.

"How can I tell what I should say when I don't know what the question is?" asked Garnett.

"Couldn't you guess at the question?"

"I am a poor guesser."

"Well, try and guess this time."

"It would be useless."

"Why?"

"Because I am sure I could never arrive at a conclusion. Besides, why should I? What is to prevent you asking me right out what you want to know? Perhaps it is a question that I could not answer satisfactorily. In that case we shall have been wasting a great deal of time."

"Well, Garnett, the simple fact is that—"

"What?"

"Why, Garnett, I wanted to tell you that I—I—"

"Go on."

"I will. In plain words, I want you to—that is—I—I—"

"Shall I finish the question for you?" whispered Garnett, as she nestled a little closer to her companion.

As said before, the seat was only large enough for two people, provided they squeezed together, so when Garnett tried to edge still nearer to Ralph, what could the young man do but put his arm around Garnett's waist?

I don't see that he could do anything else.

No more could he.

So he just made a virtue of necessity and clasped Garnett so tightly that she gasped again.

"Will you finish my question, Garnett?" he asked, in the same subdued tones in which she had last spoken to him. "Do you think you can?"

"Shall I try?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Garnett, "you wanted to tell me that—that—"

"Go on," said Ralph. "You don't manage it any better than I did."

"Oh, yes. I think I do. I may be mistaken, but I think you wanted to let me know that—you—"

Garnett hung her head, and her lovely face flushed up as the sweet confusion sent the warm blood rushing over her neck and face. She could not proceed, and Ralph had drawn her face very close to his by this time. He was looking straight into her eyes, and his hair was mingling with hers.

"Garnett, you must know what I want to say. You have known it since the time I first saw you, have you not? for I am sure I conveyed it in my looks."

"Ralph, I am only a poor, nameless girl, without anything to offer you but my—my love. That is yours for all time."

The kiss that had been trembling on the lips so near together for the last five minutes was quickly consummated, and then the lovers sat quite still for half an hour without speaking, as is the custom of lovers all over the civilized world.

In the mean time, the shadow of the moun-

tain had reached above their heads and enveloped them as if in a protecting embrace, that would shield them from the evils ever on the alert to attack those who love.

"We must go in," said Garnett, at last. "It is very late."

"My darling!" said Ralph. "I don't like to let you go out of my sight now, especially in this strange place, where there is no one who has a perfect right to be your protector."

"Oh, I shall be safe enough. Besides, you will be under the same roof, and a cry from me would bring you to my assistance."

"Ay, indeed it would, even though I were held by a chain cable," was Ralph's passionate reply.

They walked slowly into the store, where they found the groceryman seated on the counter, whittling pine as contentedly as ever.

He smiled in a very satisfied way when the lovers came in, and if he did not know that a very momentous conversation had just terminated he wasn't as shrewd a man as he looked.

In another half-hour Garnett had retired to her room—the same one she had occupied the night before, while Ralph and the groceryman sat and talked in the store.

"Do you believe in folks marrying pretty young?" asked the groceryman of Ralph, suddenly.

"Why, I don't know; yes—I think I do," stammered Ralph, in confusion.

"So do I," said the groceryman, giving himself an emphatic slap on the thigh. "I say when a young man can get hold of a good, intelligent, virtuous girl, let him marry her, if she will have him. Never mind if she hasn't got a dollar. But in a certain case that has come under my observation very recently," he continued, "I happen to know that the girl is not so poor as her intended husband thinks."

There was no mistaking to what the groceryman referred, for he poked Ralph in the ribs, and pointed to the ceiling with his thumb, Garnett's room being right over the store.

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph, eagerly.

"Wait until to-morrow and you will know all about it," was all the satisfaction the groceryman would give him. "Go and lie down on the lounge in there, while I take a snooze under the counter."

Ralph did as he was told, and the night passed away without adventure or disturbance, in spite of the fact that Victor Renaire was a prisoner in the cellar.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A LONG TIME ON A SHORT ERRAND.

OLD Mother Renaire was busy with her cooking at her home in San Francisco the morning after the attempt to rob the train, as previously noted.

She was all alone.

"Ah, yes! ah, yes!" she muttered. "Boys are a great nuisance—a great nuisance! There is my Victor and my Jacques! both of them fine boys—fine boys! But what a trouble they are to their poor old mother!"

She turned over some sausages she was frying, and as they hissed and spluttered, kept up a low crooning that was habitual to her when alone.

"Must have breakfast by myself. I wish Victor and Jacques would come. I wonder what they are doing? And I want some money, too. Ha! ha! They can soon make some money when they come home."

Mrs. Renaire's laugh was not a pleasant one, and when heard with an accompaniment of frying sausage sounded demoniacal.

"Ha! ha! ha! They can soon make some money!" she repeated.

The utterance of this remark seemed to give Mrs. Renaire peculiar pleasure.

There was evidently some hidden meaning in this apparently innocent observation.

"Those smart officers!"

She burst into another fit of chuckling that nearly choked her.

"Think they can pipe our lay! Ha, ha, ha!"

The bag was so overcome at the thought of this delicious joke, that she had to sink into a chair and kick her heels on the floor.

There was something weird and unearthly about the mirth of this old woman.

It seemed to rise up in her throat and stick there, contorting her face as she struggled to give it vent.

"As if we could not fix enough of the police department to throw the others off the scent."

The burning of the sausages called her attention to the cooking.

She took them from the frying-pan, and mumbling and mowing, set the table for her solitary meal.

The old woman was blessed with a good appetite, and she spread out a meal that would have answered for three ordinary persons.

The sausages, flanked by bread and butter, were arranged on the table, while steaming hot coffee sent forth its fragrance from a huge breakfast cup.

"Well, I may as well begin," said Mrs. Renaire. "It is evident I am to have breakfast by myself."

She commenced on the sausages, and then

buried her features in the coffee-cup, when a sound struck on her ear and made her pause, with the cup still in her hand.

It was the heavy tramp, tramp of a man's footsteps.

Breathlessly the old woman listened.

Who was it?

"I wish Victor were here!" she muttered. "No one knows what strangers might do to a poor lone old woman like me."

The hag tried to assume an innocent, timid look, but the attempt was a failure.

She only succeeded in making her features appear still more cunning and ferocious.

Tramp, tramp, sounded the footsteps.

"Somebody coming here, sure," she muttered.

She hobbled to the door and saw that it was securely fastened with lock, bolt and bar.

"I won't open the door until I know who it is, anyhow," she resolved.

Tramp, tramp!

The steps stopped on the landing outside.

Mrs. Renaire looked through a little hole in the door, made specially for reconnoitering, but could see nothing.

Tap, tap, tap!

"Who's there?"

No answer.

"Who's there?" louder.

Still no answer.

The hag once more tried to see who her visitor could be, but the little hole did not enlighten her at all.

The visitor, whoever he was, was standing in such a position that he could not be seen through the spy-hole.

"Well, stay out there," said the old woman spitefully, as she returned to her breakfast.

Tap, tap, tap, tap!

"Ah, keep on tapping and see who will get tired first," mumbled the old woman, as she took a large bite out of a slice of bread.

A bang at the door, evidently from the toe of a heavy boot made her swallow the bread before she was quite ready, and it almost choked her.

She bounced out of her chair with much more than her usual agility, and again peeped through the little hole in the door.

Then she started back in surprise.

The next minute she was removing the bar, pushing back the bolt and turning the key with feverish impatience.

She threw open the door, and—

Victor Renaire stumbled into the room!

Without a word he flung himself into the chair lately occupied by his mother, and emptied the cup of hot coffee at a draught.

The old woman was busy fastening the door.

When she had satisfied herself that it was secure, she walked over to Victor and stood in front of him.

"Why, Victor, my boy, where have you been? You look tired out."

Victor did not answer, but attacked the bread and sausage with the savage voracity of a half-starved man.

"Haven't you had anything to eat?" went on his mother.

"Shut your mouth, and don't be a fool," was Victor's unfilial reply in surly tones. "If you had had such a time as I have, you would want something to eat and drink."

"Well, don't be mad, Victor," said his mother humbly. "Eat and drink all you can, and tell me about it afterward."

"Are you sure that door is all right," said Victor, looking around anxiously.

"Yes, deary. I fixed it carefully. There is no fear of anybody coming in."

"I hope not."

"Why, who are you afraid of?"

"How do I know?" returned Victor. "Do we ever want people to come blundering in here unawares?"

"No, deary, of course not," agreed the old woman. "But where have you been?"

"Why, I have been having trouble, and it is a wonder I am here now."

"Got home before you expected to, did you, Victor? I thought you would have been here yesterday."

"So I should if I had had any kind of decent luck. Look at my wrists."

He held out his hands as he spoke, and showed that his wrists were bruised and bleeding.

"What do you suppose caused those marks, eh, mother?"

"Surely not—"

"Yes, bracelets. That's what. But they will have to improve the present make of handcuff's before they can keep them on Victor Renaire," he said with a bitter laugh. "I never saw any yet that I couldn't wriggle out of."

"Ha, ha! My own boy—my own boy!" croaked the old woman, admiringly.

"Yes; but your own boy had to use all the wits he had to escape this time, I tell you," returned Victor.

"Tell me all about it," said his mother, as she poured out another cup of coffee for her hopeful son.

Victor then told of his adventures with the groceryman, how he had had Garnett secure, and how she was rescued from him, and how the groceryman had handcuffed him and put him in

the cellar, after obtaining possession of the precious ebony box.

The reader knows already how these events took place, but does not know how Victor escaped from the cellar.

When the groceryman locked him up there with handcuffs on his wrists, he felt satisfied that the dwarf could not get away, try as he would.

Had his hands been free, he might have found some means of getting his liberty, but under the circumstances he was certain that Victor would be found in the cellar in the morning.

As soon as he was alone Victor addressed himself to the task of getting rid of his handcuffs.

It was a long and troublesome job, but it was accomplished at last.

His wrists and the backs of his hands were raw and bleeding, but he did not think of that, as he looked around by the light of a match to find a means of escape.

In one corner were the steps by which he had been brought down, but the trap-door was securely fastened.

He could not get out that way.

Besides, if he had managed to get through the door, he would only have found himself in the store, where, for anything he knew, the groceryman might be sitting ready to shoot him down as soon as he showed his face.

He must look for some other outlet.

Ah! A window!

It was a very small opening, but when the dwarf had forced it open, which did not take him long, he found that it led into the open air.

From its position, he knew the window must be at the back of the house.

Once through the window, and he could bid defiance to the groceryman.

He climbed up to the opening and put his head through.

Then he attempted to work his shoulders through afterward, and stuck fast.

The opening was too small.

He wriggled and wriggled, but with no perceptible effect.

He was just about giving it up in despair, when he felt himself move forward.

Another mighty effort, and his shoulders were through.

The rest of his body soon followed, and Victor Renaire stood in the open air and shook his fist at the house wherein the groceryman sat, wholly unconscious that his prisoner had slipped through his fingers.

"Now for Frisco!" thought Jacques.

He made his way into the groceryman's stable and took the liberty of appropriating one of the stage horses that had been left there when the stage changed a short time before.

The animal might be tired, but Victor Renaire was not the man to consider a horse when he wanted to use him.

Springing on his back, without a saddle, Victor rode him out into the road, walked him quietly along in the dust until out of hearing of the groceryman's residence, and then put him at full gallop for Santora.

He got there just in time to make a train for San Francisco, leaving his jaded horse hitched to a fence, to be taken charge of by anybody who chose to take the animal and risk the chance of being hung for a horse-thief.

"And if ever I get my fingers on that groceryman," added Victor, as he finished his narration, "there will be a funeral and the groceryman will use the coffin."

"Now what are you going to do, deary?" asked the old woman. "Won't they be after you here?"

"Well, let them. I guess we can keep them out," said Victor, sullenly.

"Not for long, deary. Unless we can fix the police, we shall have them coming here to batter our door down."

"Well, let me alone for a while. I am too tired now to talk," said Victor, as he threw himself on the bed in the corner.

"Have you got any money, deary?" asked the old woman. "I am cleaned out. I am glad you have come home, or I should have had nothing to eat."

Victor threw a five-dollar gold-piece to his mother, who picked it up and examined it closely.

"It isn't one of your make, is it, deary?" she asked, doubtfully.

"No, of course not. Did I ever send you out with a bogus coin?" returned Victor.

"No, deary; but then, when you are hard up, you might do things that you never did before," said his mother, as she put a shawl over her head and turned toward the door.

"Going out, mother?" asked Victor.

"Yes, deary. We shall want some dinner after a while, and I must get some meat and things."

"All right; don't be long. I will fasten the door after you."

The old woman opened the door and stepped on the landing, waiting while she heard Victor replace the heavy bar and secure the bolt.

"What a shame it is that my poor Victor has such trouble," she mumbled, as she went cautiously down the stairs and into the street.

"There is old Mother Renaire!" said a little school-girl as she turned the corner.

The old woman turned around to slap the child if she could catch her.

The little one was too quick, however, and got to a safe distance, where she stood laughing at the hag's impotent rage.

Then the latter suddenly felt a strong hand on her wrist, and a voice said in her ear:

"Come along, Mrs. Renaire. You are wanted at the police station."

"What do you mean, you impudent scoundrel?" said the old woman. "What have you got against me? If my son Victor were here, he—"

"Better keep your mouth shut about your son Victor," returned the officer, who was in citizen's clothes. "We will attend to him later on."

While Victor Renaire sat wondering what had detained his respected parent, that lady was shut up in a cell at the station-house, alternately weeping and cursing the self-possessed police-officers who took her ravings as a matter of course, and paid not the least attention to them.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JACQUES FOUND AT THE TRAP-DOOR.

As soon as he had shut and fastened the door after his mother, Victor Renaire threw himself on the bed again and became lost in thought.

He realized that his affairs were in desperate shape, and that his home would not be safe for him very long.

With Garnett out of his power, the ebony box captured and the officers on his track he might be excused for feeling somewhat dispirited.

"Well, I have been in a tight place before this, and always managed to come out all right," he reflected. "I'll get through this somehow. I wonder how Jacques made out. I suppose I shall know some time to-day or to-morrow."

He closed his eyes, yawned and dropped into a troubled sleep, which lasted several hours.

Then he awoke with a start and a shiver.

"What's the matter with me, I wonder?" he said, sitting up and running his skinny fingers through his tousled white hair. "I had an idea some one was in the room."

He looked at his watch.

"Past twelve o'clock! Why where can mother be? She can't have got hurt! And yet, she is an old woman, and might easily get run over. I must go and look after her."

He went to the door, and then a thought struck him.

"Why, of course. She probably came and knocked at the door, and I slept through it all. But where can she be now? She hasn't a very extensive visiting list. Perhaps she is sitting outside on the stairs."

Victor Renaire unfastened the door and threw it wide open.

At the same instant something white came bounding up the stairs and struck Victor Renaire a tremendous blow in the stomach, which landed him, doubled up in the middle of the room.

Victor Renaire was a few seconds before he could recover enough breath to make a remark.

The blow had knocked all the self-possession out of him.

Then his first impulse on coming to himself, as it were, was to use violence to the white object which had made him sit down so unceremoniously.

He arose to his feet and jumped toward the door.

Then he stopped.

"Why, Jacques!"

The white object was Jacques Renaire's head!

He had been coming up the stairs at a run, and had come in collision with his brother before he saw him.

"Yes, Jacques," responded that worthy, as he followed Victor into the room. "Where is mother?"

"That is what I want to know."

"Isn't she here?"

"No."

"Where has she gone?"

"She went out three or four hours ago to buy some meat and things, and I have not seen her since. I have been asleep, and I guess she could not wake me, so went away for a while."

"Yes, I guess that's the explanation of it," said Jacques. "But, I tell you what it is; this is no longer a safe place for us."

"You need not tell me that," said Victor. "I know it only too well."

"The train job failed."

"Is that so? How was it?"

When Jacques had related his adventures and told of his narrow escape from death by the rope, Victor said:

"So that's how Ed Ralston and the gang repay our kindness, is it? Well, I guess we are equal to fixing them when the proper time comes."

"I guess so, Victor. There are two men I have a particular grudge against. They are

that fellow Blunt and Ed Ralston. I'll settle with both of them before I die!" hissed Jacques.

"And I have to choke that groceryman before I take part in my own funeral," said Victor. "When that is done, they can lay me out as soon as they like."

"Better fasten the door, Victor."

"You are right."

"Now what is to be done?" asked Jacques. "You tell me Garnett has got away from us, that the plate and box are in the hands of the authorities, and that we are likely to have the officers here at any moment."

"That is about the way things look," said Victor.

"Sleepless Eye and Blunt started for Frisco before I did," remarked Jacques, "and I suppose they are here now. They both know that I was mixed up in that train job, but luckily they don't suspect that I am here already. If they did, they would be here before now."

"They may come to see," suggested Victor.

"Possibly. I wish Blunt would come by himself."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Don't you think I could be a match for him, even without your help?"

"Of course. But if you could attend to Blunt, why couldn't I fix Sleepless Eye?"

"One might not be missed, but if the two disappeared, there might be trouble," said Jacques. "We have experienced that sort of thing before, you know, Victor."

"Hush!"

"Oh, I am discreet. There is no one here to listen."

"You can't be too careful."

"You're right, Victor. Hark! Do you hear anything?"

"Sounds as if somebody were breathing pretty heavily outside the door."

"Who can it be, I wonder? It does not sound like mother, does it?"

"No. It is a man."

"Well, see here, Victor. We have got to find out what it is. Open the door."

Each of the brothers drew a bowie-knife and put the points of the weapons up their sleeves to conceal them.

"All ready," said Jacques.

"Well, then, I'll open the door."

Once more the bar, the bolts and the lock were manipulated by Victor and the door swung open.

No one was to be seen, but the heavy breathing continued.

The two brothers, clasping the handle of their bowies tightly looked cautiously around.

"Is that trap fastened overhead?" asked Victor. "Can you see?"

Jacques looked closely at the trap leading to the roof, of which mention has previously been made, and which was always kept securely bolted.

The bolt was shot back and the trap slightly raised!

"It is unfastened," said Jacques. "And it doesn't seem to be shut down tightly."

"That is where mother is," said Victor, with an air of conviction.

"But, listen; that is not her breathing," returned Jacques.

"I don't know about that," said Victor. "It takes a sharp ear to distinguish the difference between one person and another in that respect. She may have gone up there and fallen asleep in the shadow of the chimney. She has done such a thing before."

"Well, I will go up and see," said Jacques.

He climbed the short ladder and pushed open the trap.

"Go down, Victor! Go down!" he shouted.

"They've got me!"

Three or four faces showed themselves at the opening—faces of well-known police officers, and Victor did not wait to see more.

"I can't afford to be arrested now," he muttered. "I have an appointment I must keep to-day, whatever happens."

He ran down the stairs headlong, while the police officers and Jacques were in an inextricably confused mass at the trap-door opening in the roof.

"Come up, Jacques. It's no use your kicking," said one of the officers.

"Well, what is the use of my coming up? You come down. We shall have to come down afterward, anyhow," returned Jacques.

"That's so."

The officer carefully covered the dwarf with his revolver.

"Now go down slowly, Jacques, and stand still till we can follow you."

"All right."

The dwarf went slowly down the ladder, keeping his eyes steadily on the officer the while, ready to take advantage of the slightest chance of escape.

"That is the way, Jacques; now stand right there till I come down."

The officer turned his back to descend the ladder, and Jacques jumped toward the head of the stairs.

"Hold on, Jacques!"

The dwarf turned and saw that another officer was covering him with his six-shooter while the first was climbing down the ladder.

Jacques Renaire ground his teeth and clutched the handle of his concealed knife with the grip of a desperate man.

His case was desperate and he was thoroughly aware of the fact.

"Now, Jacques, we will decorate you with a nice new pair of bright steel bracelets," said the first officer, who stood by the side of the scowling dwarf.

"Not yet," shrieked Jacques, in an uncontrollable passion, as he drew the knife from his sleeve and plunged at the neck of the officer.

The blade gleamed in the air, and would have settled the officer's career forever if it had not been stopped.

But it was stopped!

The second officer, coming down the ladder, caught the dwarf's uplifted arm, and, while he could not prevent the blow falling, he diverted it so that it missed the intended victim.

"Ah! Getting ugly, are you, Jacques?" said the first officer.

"Curse you! You shall never take me alive!" yelled Jacques.

"Then we will take you dead. But we are bound to have you somehow."

During this short dialogue the two other officers had descended the ladder, and all four were now struggling with the infuriated dwarf.

He seemed to have the strength of half a dozen full-sized men.

He kicked, tore and tugged, all the while holding his murderous knife, cutting sometimes himself, and sometimes his antagonists, but never showing that he cared for the wounds he inflicted on himself, and apparently unexhausted by his terrible exertions.

"Take that knife away from him!" cried the first officer, "or he will cut us all to pieces with it."

"Yes, take it away from me if you can," said Jacques.

The first officer still held the handcuffs, trying to get them on the dwarf's wrists. He did not wish to kill his prisoner, though it seemed as if he could never be subdued in any other way.

At last, with two clicks, the dwarf's hands were secured, the knife was forced out of his grasp, by dint of nearly breaking his knuckles with the butt of a revolver, and Jacques Renaire was taken to the same police station in which his mother languished.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHO DR. MILTON REALLY WAS.

In the parlor at Dr. Milton's house in San Francisco were gathered the doctor himself, his daughter Pauline, and her aunt.

All three looked worn and wearied, while in Pauline's face could be read the traces of many conflicting emotions, among which horror predominated.

"Pauline," said Dr. Milton, in his cold, impassive way. "Do not distress yourself so much. Your mother was for many years unfit, mentally and physically, to mingle with her family, and I had her properly taken care of. I did not wish to distress you and Ralph, and for that reason I kept her whereabouts a secret."

"My poor mother!" moaned Pauline.

"Ah!" sighed her aunt, shaking her head dismally.

"Well, my dear, I must go out. I have to make arrangements for the funeral, and I have other business that I must attend to to-day. The women up-stairs will take care of your poor mother's remains until the undertakers arrive."

"You will not be long, father, will you?"

"No. Not more than an hour."

Dr. Milton opened the door and—was met by Victor Renaire.

"Wait a minute, Dr. Milton. I have something to say to you."

Dr. Milton started back in surprise, and then he hissed in the dwarf's ear:

"Come up in your own house and talk over matters there."

"No; that won't do. It is you or I to suffer now, and I am going to look after myself."

As soon as Pauline had seen Victor Renaire she hastened to her father's library, where she rang the telephone bell, and soon found herself in communication with her visitor of the evening before. She told him that the time had come for him to make his appearance, according to their previous arrangement.

Then she returned to the room where Victor Renaire and her father were standing face to face.

But who were the other three persons in the parlor who had come in since she had left the room?

"Why, Ralph, is it you?" she exclaimed delightedly, as she kissed her brother. "And Garnett too?"

The three young people were soon engaged in close conversation. Pauline did not know how to break the news of their mother's return and sudden death, so she dissembled her feelings of grief as well as she could and listened with interest to a recital of the adventures of Garnett and Ralph.

She looked admiringly at the big groceryman,

who, attired in a well-made suit of black, looked very different to the man who had checkmated the game of Victor Renaire at the stage station.

"Who is this man?" her father was saying.

"Officer William Grant, at your service, sir. Here is a piece of property that I understand belongs to you," he continued, producing the ebony box and showing its contents. "Do you want it?"

"It is not mine."

"It was in your possession."

"I do not admit that fact."

"Consider yourself under arrest."

"Who will arrest me?"

"I will."

Officer William Grant put his back against the door while he drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. He slipped one on the right hand of Victor Renaire and held it while he reached out to grasp Dr. Milton by the shoulder.

Like a flash, the latter drew a revolver and fired straight at the officer. The bullet grazed his cheek and buried itself in the wall. At the same moment Victor Renaire broke away and swung the loose handcuff in the air to bring it down on Grant's head. The flying handcuff was caught before it could descend by the hand of a man who suddenly entered the door, and who was none other than Pauline's visitor.

In a minute Renaire and Dr. Milton were chained together, while Ralph, Pauline, Garnett, and the aunt looked on in amazement.

"The game's up!" said Victor Renaire, sullenly. "I'll quit."

"But I will not," said Doctor Milton, indignantly. "What is the meaning of this outrage in a gentleman's private house?"

"Simmer down," Dr. Milton. "Here is some one who can explain matters."

He pushed the door wide open, and disclosed—*Sleepless Eye, the Detective*.

"Quite right, Blunt, old fellow. Quite right. Doctor Milton, I don't know whether you are mixed up with the Renaire counterfeiting gang or not, but I don't believe you are. There is no evidence to that effect, anyhow. But I arrest you, in the name of the State of California, for robbing public stage-coaches at divers times and places."

"Impossible!" came in chorus from his children, Garnett and the aunt.

"Not at all impossible," was Sleepless Eye's cool reply. "Under the name of Black Bart, Doctor Milton has been playing his little game very successfully. I have been on his trail for a long time, and though I suspected he lived in San Francisco under another name, I never could run him down until now. Garnett, my dear, duty first. I am a detective and not easily surprised, but how do you come here? Never mind; tell me when we reach home."

"I'll make you pay for this," fumed Doctor Milton. "It is all a ridiculous mistake."

"Not at all, as I can prove when the time comes. Moreover, it has lately come to my knowledge that you made your wife, who has been known as Madame Ponoisi, sign a paper, giving you the bulk of her property, accomplishing the action by misrepresenting the nature of the document you offered her to sign."

"It's a lie!" yelled Doctor Milton, or Black Bart, foaming with passion. "Who can prove it?"

"I can!" said a weak voice at the door.

He turned quickly, and, with a loud cry of horror, fell to the floor.

"Take it away! Take it away!" he cried. "She has come back from the other world to hunt me to death. I confess all!"

Pauline rushed toward the door, but the fainting form of Madame Ponoisi lay at her feet. A quick gasp and she was indeed dead.

Doctor Milton had been premature in pronouncing life extinct the night before, and she had revived from her deathlike swoon sufficiently to come down-stairs and speak a word in the cause of justice.

They carried her up-stairs, and for a time they thought Ralph would go mad with grief and horror.

There is but little more to tell.

The Renaires were all taken with their friend Black Bart to the Calaveras county jail, and after a full trial were sentenced to the penitentiary at St. Quentin. Black Bart was sentenced for life, Victor for twenty years and his brothers for ten each. The old woman died in jail before she could be brought to trial.

Among the papers of Victor Renaire was found a document setting forth that Garnett was the actual daughter of William Strood, or Sleepless Eye, as we prefer to call him. The child had been twice stolen, for the reasons given by the dwarf himself in a previous chapter.

Returned to her father, she soon felt it incumbent upon herself to leave him, and a year after the incarceration of his father and the death of his mother, Ralph claimed as his bride the young girl who had had such an adventurous existence. They live with her father, Mr. Strood, in the house in Pinewood, and have never regretted the day they took each other for better or worse.

The property of Mme. Ponoisi was divided up between Ralph and Pauline, and Colonel Blunt

lives in the old house in San Francisco with his wife. Need we say that his wife is Pauline herself? Colonel Blunt is a man much respected by his neighbors, and is said to be pretty 'cute on 'change.

The Angel Camp Gang was broken up thoroughly. Sleepless Eye had such knowledge of its secrets that it was no longer safe for the train-wreckers and cut-throats.

Ed Ralston vanished from California altogether, and is said to be running a faro bank in New York. Sam Shaw and six of the gang who robbed, or tried to rob, the train on which the Pacific Detective and Dr. Milton had their tussle, were afterward caught and are doing time at St. Quentin.

Black Bart, though safe enough behind prison walls, is not forgotten by the people of California, and there are many wild and improbable tales still told of the former doings of the famous "Robber Poet"—the Lone Po-8 of the road.

Some of the smaller fry of outlaws would doubtless like to follow in his footsteps, but however enthusiastic they may be on the subject, they soon cool off when they remember that they would have to cope with one of the ablest officers in California, in the person of SLEEPLESS EYE, THE PACIFIC DETECTIVE.

THE END.

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